God's Word, Spoken or Otherwise

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God's Word, Spoken or Otherwise

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's (1817–1898) Muslim Exegesis of the Bible

By

Charles M. Ramsey

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For Chishti

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Preface

'Not all those who wander are lost', as Tolkien's line goes, but some of us have wandered for a very long time. I am thankful to such dedicated companions, advisors and fellow sojourners without whom I could not have reached this stage of the journey. My initial thanks are to my academic mentor David Thomas, who has been a sagely guide throughout this process. I could not have wished for a more capable and responsive supervisor. I must also thank Clinton Bennett, without whom I would have meandered down other paths. I am profoundly grateful for such wisdom and critical discernment in guiding me to Birmingham. There I was blessed by the company of Andrew Davies, David Cheetham, Christian Troll, John Chesworth, Mustafa Draper, Richard Allan, Selena Su and Azmi Muhammad. Where else can one watch Pakistani cricket in the morning, and stroll the shire in the afternoon?

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Notes on Translation and Transliteration

The transliteration of the words and phrases of the Urdu original follows the Library of Congress system (LOC: Rules in Arabic script). Arabic terms have been rendered according to the rules of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (3rd edition). Terms now commonly used in English are rendered according to the Oxford English Dictionary spelling. The spelling of Biblical names and terms follows the Revised Standard Version. Translations from the Qur'an follow those of M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (2004). Abdel Haleem's phraseology has been followed when necessary to render Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Urdu into English. We have maintained the Flügel numbering system used by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, but have added the corresponding numbers from the standard Egyptian text of the Qur'an in (brackets).

Abbreviations

TFA	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Taṣānīf-i Aḥmadiyyah*, vol. 1 (Aligarh: Institute Press, 1883); vol. 2, 1887.
TK1	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tabyīn al-kalām*, Part 1 (Ghazipur, author's press, 1862).
TK2	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tabyīn al-kalām*, Part 2, (Ghazipur, author's press, 1865).
TK3	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tabyīn al-kalām*, Part 3, in TFA, vol. 2 (Aligarh: Institute Press, 1887).
TQ	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Parts 1–6, in TFA, vols 3–9 (Aligarh: Institute Press, 1880–95); Part 7 (Agra: Mufīd-i ām Press, 1904).
TA	Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tahẕīb al-akhlāq* (*The Mohammedan Social Reformer*), Phase 1, vols 1–7 (Aligarh Institute Press, 1871–1877); Phase 2, vols 8–10 (1879–1881); vols 11–14 (1894–1897).
EI^2	*Encyclopaedia of Islam* (*Second Edition*), edited by P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2007).
EI^3	*Encyclopaedia of Islam* (*Third Edition*), edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the Urdu exegesis of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, revelation is a chorus. Prophetic messages instruct divine law and yet nature's message, the original *sharīʿa*, is no less audible for being inarticulate. The one harmonized with the other without contradiction, for the word was in the work, and the work was in the word. This was so in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, because the essence of Islam is *tawḥīd*: the integral coherence of the divine word and work displayed in natural and prophetic revelation (*waḥy*).[1] This study explores Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of revelation from an unexpected vantage point, the exegesis of the Bible.

This is unexpected for many reasons, not least being that there is perhaps no greater point of divergence in Christian – Muslim relations than the perception of the other's scripture.[2] Historically the Bible and Qur'an have been understood to be in competition. Sayyid Ahmad, however, posited that there is a convergence in the scriptural testimonies of the 'Abrahamic religion' (*millat-i Ibrāhīm*) that far exceeded any presumed divergence. As we shall see in his exegesis, Sayyid Ahmad engaged in a serious study of the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament not as another's scripture, but rather as a concomitant part of his own. The key text explored in this study, namely *Tabyīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-tawrāt wa-l-injīl ʿalā millat al-Islām* (Elucidation of the Word in Commentary of the Torah and Gospel According to the Religion of Islam), is an explorative demonstration of the ligatures assumed in his purview. It is, as Sayyid Ahmad recounted, 'a Mohamedan commentary on the Bible'.[3]

1 A.J. Wensinck and Andrew Rippin, 'Waḥy', in EI[2]; William A. Graham, 'Revelation', in Daniel W. Brown, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 62–63.

2 Abdullah Saeed, 'How Muslims View the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment?', in Joseph A. Camilleri Luca Anceschi, Ruwan Palapathwala, and Andrew Wicking, eds, *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 191–210; Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'On the Qur'anic Accusation of Scriptural Falsification (*taḥrīf*) and Christian Anti-Jewish Polemic', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130, no. 2 (2010): 189–202.

3 Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tabyīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-Tawrāt wa-l Injīl ʿalā millat al-Islām*, vols 1–3 (Aligarh: Sir Sayyid Academy, 2004). The *Tabyīn* texts examined in this study are from this edition, which contains a mechanical reprint of the earliest versions contained in the archives of Aligarh Muslim University, India.

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Printed as serialized editions by his personal press in Ghazipur, in India's United Provinces, *Tabyīn* is a fragmentary compilation of what Sayyid Ahmad, or Sir Sayyid as he is known in the subcontinent, intended as a candid, critical and reverent study of 'each of the Bible's books in light of the revelation granted to the Prophet Muḥammad'.[4] Although the final output fell short of the original goal, the prolegomenon (Part 1) and writings on Genesis 1–11 (Part 2) and the Gospel of Matthew 1–5 (Part 3) form a substantive body of work (over 55,000 words). These address an array of subjects and shed light on the progression of Sir Sayyid's thought, often providing glimpses of nascent ideas that are taken up again later in fuller form. One subject of enquiry, however, that persisted throughout his exegetical writings was the quest to understand the interplay of prophetic and natural revelation. More specifically, Sayyid Ahmad sought a way to reconcile the paradox of divine immanence and transcendence, or how there can be at once divine unicity and divine intervention in the cosmos. The theme of revelation tethers an array of correlated ideas explored over the course of his life back to this foundational study of the Bible first jobbed on the mechanical typeset in Ghazipur.

Tabyīn, in this light, is a window into the mind of a seminal thinker among modern Muslims who inhabited a critical juncture in the history of South Asia. A prolific writer and educationist, Sayyid Ahmad was a pathfinder who advocated Muslim participation in the socio-political structures of the British Raj.[5] A doyen of modernist Islam, his study of the religious sciences remains an enduring legacy.[6] Winds of change, however, are seldom welcome, and Sayyid Ahmad was demonized as often as lionized for his ideas. One of the most common contentions was that he had become overly enamoured with the trappings of the West. Sayyid Ahmad was a man of his time, some would say, and in that time ideas and power flowed from West to East. But this perception undermines the intellectual dynamism of this context and the agency of its thinkers.[7] European interlopers and their post-Enlightenment knowledge, as it were, climbed aboard an Indian train that was already in motion. The wheels of integral religious reform were already turning and bringing forth

4 TK, 1: 3, 15; TK, 2: 340–341.

5 Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India* (Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 55–74.

6 See, for example, Akbar S. Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 36–38; Riffat Hassan, 'Islamic Modernist and Reformist Discourse in South Asia', in Shireen T. Hunter, ed., *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 159–165.

7 For greater detail, see Daniel M. Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the 'Mystic East'* (London: Routledge, 1999).

significant change in the religious sciences in this context. In the main, it was European influences that affected his study of the Bible, and subsequently of the Qur'an and Hadith, but Sir Sayyid's work cannot be adequately understood apart from the profound continuance he shared with his own Persianate tradition.[8] Encounter with European ideas catalysed his exploration, but this alone cannot account for Sayyid Ahmad's unexpected, and yet ingenious course of action represented in the composition of *Tabyīn*.

The tone of religious exchanges between Muslims and Christians in the second half of the nineteenth century had become increasingly polemical, but Sayyid Ahmad ran against this tide and claimed that the Bible (Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament) and Qur'an were intended to elucidate one another. As he noted in reading Genesis,

> Without this history [of creation], the world would be in darkness, not knowing where it came from or to where it is going. In the first page of this book, a child may learn more in an hour, than all the philosophers in the world learned without it in a thousand years.[9]

Instead of disputing from afar, with each party in their own barracks, Sayyid Ahmad gathered Muslims, Christians and at least one Jewish person to study the Bible as a text that complements rather than competes with the Qur'an. The reasons for this approach merit consideration and will be looked at in due course, but let it suffice at this point to say that Sayyid Ahmad believed that the Bible and the Qur'an shared a dialogical coherence because they proceeded from the same source. This idea is problematic on a number of levels, and it raises a wide array of issues but, regardless of these challenges, the approach taken by Sayyid Ahmad anticipates what has been known as Scriptural Reasoning for well over a century.[10] The underlying reason for this, as will be argued throughout, is to be found in Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of revelation.

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8 The term 'Persianate' is a cognate of the term 'Islamicate' that signifies proclivities shared by the cultural region, allowing for the nuanced but crucial differentiation between an ideal, such as Islam, and its cultural manifestations. The term reflects the commonalities of ethos and the worldview shared by various ethnolinguistic groups across the 'Balkans to Bengal complex'. For a robust exposition, see Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 177–245. This builds upon the earlier work of Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

9 TK, 2: 30.

10 David F. Ford, 'An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning between Jews, Christians, and Muslims', *Modern Theology* 22, no. 2 (2006): 345–366.

This leads to a central question explored in this study: how did Sayyid Ahmad conceptualize prophetic revelation? His writings indicate a range of open responses to what is now presumed to be a closed question on Qur'anic revelation. The Qur'an is for Muslims the verbatim Word of God, revealed over twenty-three-years to the Prophet Muḥammad through the agency of the Archangel Gabriel. In this view, the Qur'an is wholly externalized, the words were like water passing through a statue, or 'a grain of corn … through the body of a bird'.[11] The understanding that Muḥammad was a passive recipient of the word of God is regarded as normative, even foundational, to Muslim faith and identity.[12]

But historically there have been prominent Muslims exegetes who thought differently. August exegetes such as al-Suyuṭī (d. 1505) and Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762), who feature prominently in Sayyid Ahmad's work, explained that Gabriel brought the 'sense of the message, and the Prophet learned these meanings and expressed them in the language of the Arabs'.[13] As Abdelmadjid Charfi explained, 'This point of view is perhaps the closest position to modern rationality and may serve as a starting point for a renewed examination of the question of inspiration'.[14] Traditional theories do not deny other forms or revelation, such as that given to earlier prophets and holy persons, or even to the honeybees (*Al-Naḥl*, Q 16:69) for that matter, but the endorsed view is that the nature and form of the Qur'an are unique and exquisite, and above all else, wholly unobstructed by human interference. Therein lies the heart of the challenge confronting Sayyid Ahmad as a modern rationalist: How can the Qur'an retain its essential divine otherness, while being simultaneously present in human history? In this study, we explore how Sayyid Ahmad reappropriated a

11 Shabbir Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 126, 119–134.

12 Helmut Gätje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 2.

13 Abdelmadjid Charfi, *Islam: Between Message and History*, trans. David Bond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 41. He cited Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyuṭī, *Al-itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Mustafa Dīb al-Bughā. 2 vols. (Damascus and Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), Chapter 10, 'Concerning what was revealed of the Qur'an to some of the Companions', and Chapter 16, 'How revelation happened' (for an English translation see Hamid Algar, *The Perfect Guide to the Sciences of the Qur'ān: Al-itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān* [Reading: Publishing, 2011], 71–74, and 91–116); Jārullāh Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamaksharī, *Al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduh, 1966), 299 and 310. For a similar perspective, see Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-kabīr fī usūl al-tafsīr*, trans. Maulana Muḥammad Rafīq Chaudhary (Lahore: Maqtaba Qur'āniyat, 2004), 27.

14 Charfi, *Islam*, 41.

traditional paradigm – one upheld by mainstream and even arch-conservative scholars of Hadith – in order to provide categories and nomenclature to discuss in manifold ways how prophetic messages became manifest. As we shall see, this paradigm opens the way for Sayyid Ahmad's approach to scripture.

Tabyīn marked the beginning of what Sayyid Ahmad perceived as an urgent quest, and one that he pursued for the remainder of his days, namely to identify universal exegetical keys to unlock the original and intended meaning latent in prophetic revelation. As we shall see, Sayyid Ahmad framed his thoughts on the subject according to a Sufi-philosophical hermeneutical framework.[15] He read scripture through the 'multidimensional and multivalent pre-text' characteristic of his Persianate context. He was predisposed by this established rationalist channel to see both the nuanced coherence and contingency inherent in all creation. His view of revelation seeds and sanctions the reverent but critical intertextual reading of the Bible and Qur'an as commenced in *Tabyīn* and continued through his final exegetical work *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. If the Qur'an is not a transcendent intrusion, but rather came into being within the cosmos – no matter how – it is easier to see how this revelation is not so different from the Hadiths, which come from Muḥammad himself, and from the books of the Bible, which come from a series of authors.

1 Approaching the Texts

The basic approach followed in this book has been to read Sayyid Ahmad's works in the original Urdu and in the chronological order in which they were composed. It is important to note from that outset that *Tabyīn* was never technically a book. It was a collection of essays and fragmentary exegesis compiled and printed in stages by the author. It became apparent to me in the early phase of this research that the three 'parts' (*hissa*) of *Tabyīn* were not presented in the order in which they were composed. In actuality, the writings in Part 3 were composed before Parts 1 and 2. The three parts were numbered, however, according to the logical progression commencing with Part 1, which is a rationale for the study, followed by a commentary on Genesis 1–11 in Part 2, and a commentary on Matthew 1–5 in Part 3. Portions were printed

15 Oliver Leaman, ed. *The Qur'ān: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 34–35; William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1979), 3. Within Muslim Scholastic theology, this is the difference between creation (*ḥudūth*) and contingency (*imkān*). For greater detail on this hermeneutical framework, see H.G. Widdowson, *Text, Context, Pretext: Critical Issues in Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

and circulated in the order in which they were composed, and subsequently collated and re-published in present form. Sayyid Ahmad presented both of his principal exegetical writings, *Tabyīn* and *Tafsīr*, in parts (*hissa*) within the volumes (*jild*) of *Taṣānīf-i Aḥmadiyyah*, an oeuvre of his religious writings. We have followed this terminology and order throughout.

A chronological reading demonstrates the progression of his ideas. This is important because Sayyid Ahmad was famously known for reversing positions. As the historian Tariq Hasan has observed, the courage to admit mistakes and to reverse courses (*rajuwāt*) is characteristic of great thinkers and is truly one of Sayyid Ahmad's most definitive traits.[16] The changes provide benchmarks useful for tracking significant shifts in his interpretative approach and theology as he moves along a rationalist continuum. The order, however, also shines light upon what did not change, and is useful for identifying what endured over decades of subsequent writings.

The methodology applied in this study is historical and text driven. It is a cosmopolitan approach, which includes the study of foundational texts, but that also connects these to questions of modern-day scholarship across disciplines and regions.[17] I seek an empathetic approach that demonstrates a willingness to learn 'the language of the alien tradition as a new and second first language', as Alasdair MacIntyre has described it.[18] This is reflected, for example, in a resistance to simplistic dichotomies that portray religious traditions as monolithic, static or beholden to an imagined orthodoxy.[19]

One seeks to join Sayyid Ahmad's journey of hermeneutical exploration to understand the universal genius of the Qur'an. His was a long route through the Bible and into the mind of British Christians. One approaches the study cognizant of the late philosopher Paul Ricœur's advice that the principal way identity is formed – or better yet, discovered – is through the experience of encountering others. For Ricœur, consciousness is not pre-given; it is emergent

16 Tariq Hasan, *The Aligarh Movement and the Making of the Indian Muslim Mind (1857–2002)* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2006), 34.

17 Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds. *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 2–6. For a similar application see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Karachi: Oxford, 2004), 7.

18 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 364; Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 91–116.

19 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012) 118–134; Zaman, *The Ulama*, 38–59. On Muslim 'self-Orientalization', see Ahmed, *What Is Islam*, 246–300.

and developmental.[20] Consciousness is accomplished not primarily through self-reflection, which is one's evaluation of phenomena, but rather through encounter. The encountered persons become like cultural 'texts' whose interpretation provides context for the understanding of one's self. It is in relation to others that one becomes more confidently aware of the self; and it is through these encounters that the story of the 'other' becomes inextricably intertwined with one's own.

Building upon Ricœur's understanding, we also follow David Brown in observing the link between personal identity ('I') and collective identity ('we') as a narrative accomplishment. This is the view that Identity is heavily connected to narrative, the story that one inhabits. Identity occurs, as Brown has convincingly argued, 'at the point of confrontation between the person as a potential speaker/actor and the system of discourse that enables and constrains speaking/acting. Narrative is that mode of discourse through which human action is interpreted as meaningful agency'.[21] Narrative allows for those feeling excluded, and those who exclude, to imagine full participation and shared belonging. As Brown explains, 'One experiences "belonging" to the extent that one is able to interweave interpretations of self with the interpretations of others through narrative discourse'.[22] Identity is bigger than belonging to a shared taxonomy of categories, such as of a particular nation, religion, age or socio-economic circumstance; identity is also tied to agency, or the power to contribute towards a result. Otherwise stated, 'I belong because I helped make the decision'. If an experience is to be transformative, it must succeed in empowering the actor with a sense of agency. One reads *Tabyīn* as transformative, and Sayyid Ahmad's move away from 'Bible or Qur'an' towards 'Bible and Qur'an' as a narrative accomplishment.

2 Approaching the Context

There is a presumed dichotomy between the traditional and the modern that has adversely constrained the academic study of Islam in general, and of Muslim responses to modernity in particular. Talal Asad and Safdar Ahmed,

20 David R. Brown, 'On Narrative and Belonging', in Morny Joy, ed., *Paul Ricœur and Narrative: Context and Contestation* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), 110. Paul Ricœur, 'The Human Being as the Subject Matter of Philosophy', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14, no. 2 (1988): 203–215.

21 Brown, 'On Narrative and Belonging', 111.

22 Ibid., 109; J.M. Bernstein, 'Grand Narratives', in David Wood, ed., *On Paul Ricœur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 102.

for example, have noted that the traditional/modern dichotomy perpetuates a caricature of Islam that juxtaposes the 'Eastern' as equivalent to tradition, and which by definition is in opposition to 'Western rationality'.[23] In this paradigm, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Muslim thinkers are typecast as heirs to a stagnant intellectual system. They are in the dark, awaiting the light of modernity. Dormant and fallow, it is only by contact with European post-Enlightenment ideas that they can progress from 'tradition' to 'rationality'. The shock from the experience, however, is so profound that the religious thinker must move through the prism of modernity and its interloping epistemology to break free from the shackles of 'tradition'. One consequence of this dichotomy and its typecasting has been a diminished assessment of rationalist philosophy (*falsafa*) and dialectical theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) as integrally Muslim. This dichotomy, as Safdar Ahmed has cogently warned, perpetuates the view of Islamic modernism as an essentially Western-inspired (and therefore un-Islamic) intellectual movement.[24]

But this was simply not the case. What recent studies are presenting about the pre- and early-modern Persianate world, with its poles in Iran and India, is indicative of an intellectual domain that, if not at its zenith, was far from stagnant.[25] There is much still to be grasped, but it appears that the period following the *Pax Mughalana* in the mid-sixteen century was a 'dynamic era of intellectual inquiry'.[26] Without this signal advance, Sayyid Ahmad's theistic evaluation of the supernatural will continue to be dismissed as a European import. But if Sir Sayyid's ideas are considered within the progression of a complex and even 'paradoxically contradictory' intellectual tradition, as all great civilizations must be, then his voice becomes part of a larger chorus that challenges preconceived notions of this context. The composite result indicates that India sustained a community of theological enquiry that was more dynamic than other regions of the Muslim world.

To properly gauge our subject, however, we must revisit the cultural landscape. The affinity shared between India and Iran – two poles in the

23 Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2–4; Wael B. Hallaq, 'On Orientalism, Self-Consciousness, and History', *Islamic Law and Society* 18, nos 3–4 (2011): 387–439; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2–7.

24 Safdar Ahmed, *Reform and Modernity in Islam: The Philosophical, Cultural, and Political Discourses among Muslim Reformers* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 73–74.

25 Sheldon Pollock, 'Introduction', in idem, ed., *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 8.

26 Ibid., 10.

Persianate complex – is well established, but there are facets of this worldview that need to be revisited here in order to set the stage. It is important to recall that the rulers of Safavid Iran and Mughal India were heirs of the Central Asian Timurids and they shared many commonalities. One that is of central importance here is the view of corporeal sacrality. This was expressed, for example, in the manner in which sainthood and kingship were embodied by sacred figures.[27] Rulers modelled their courts, as Afzar Moin has convincingly argued, on the pattern of Sufi orders and 'fashioned themselves as the promised messiah'.[28] Instead of looking to earlier caliphal patterns to legitimize their rule, there was a 'cultural logic of sacred kingship from the concrete acts of rulers who embodied a corporeal sacrality'.[29] It is essential to see that the border between the spiritual and physical realm was porous, and the divine transcendent was manifestly active in the corporeal. Ritual performance, for example, was given priority over religious doctrine precisely because it was being enacted in the present. This was not mere popular religiosity, or the practice of a few uninformed persons on the periphery of society. Far from marginal, this multivalent mysticism was reflective of a spiritual cosmology that ordered the universe. The central and continuous influence of such practices and beliefs was of such importance that it calls for a re-assessment of the descriptive characteristics of 'orthodoxy'.[30]

This emerging re-assessment of pre- and early modern Persianate Muslim religious thought and experience opens the way for a more complex view of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his relation to – for lack of a better word – Sufism.[31] Pre-modern Indian Muslims should be perceived through the lens of a religiosity that takes this complex intellectual and social landscape into full account.[32]

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27 Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10–13.

28 A. Afzar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 10–12.

29 Ibid.

30 Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 5–7; Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, 1–16; Munis D. Faruqi, *The Princes of the Mughal Empire, 1504–1719* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–23; Audrey Truschke, *Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1–26.

31 Jamal Malik, 'Sufi Amnesia in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Tahdhib al-akhlaq*', in Jamal Malik and Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh, eds., *Sufism East and West: Mystical Islam and Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Modern World* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 76–103; Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements in the early Religious Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan', in Bruce B. Lawrence, ed. The *Rose and the Rock: Mystical and Rational Elements in the Intellectual History of South Asian Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Programs in Comparative study on Islamic and Arabian South Asia, 1979), 61–103.

32 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 11.

This is not otherworldly pietism, but rather a deeply ingrained sense for the infusion of the spiritual in the practical matters of authority, governance and economic provision that differs from that of other contexts and merits its own nuanced assessment. There is a need, as Afzar Moin has cogently argued, for a shift that will 'highlight the way their [Persianate] rationality was constructed differently than "moderns", whether eastern or western'.[33] The point is not to re-emphasize the pervasive Sufi character of this context, which has been more than adequately accomplished elsewhere, but rather to underscore the need in contemporary historiography to recalibrate a view of this 'Islam' as less than, or marginal to 'real Islam'. The vast amount of material evidence from this context should not be regarded as peripheral, but rather as central to one of the largest and most intellectually prolific zones of Islamicate culture. It is of critical importance at the outset of our study to see that the range of views described as acceptably Muslim in Sayyid Ahmad's milieu was broader than has been assumed in previous works and in much of the twentieth-century academic study of Islam.

Addressing contested boundaries of orthodoxy will be of particular importance for assessing Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation and approach to textual interpretation. As Shahzad Bashir has demonstrated in extensive detail, there were highly-nuanced means to distinguish between literal and symbolic meanings in phenomena. Interpretative approaches applied to texts, art and spiritual experience involved the interweaving of actual and imagined subjects. Supernatural events held multi-layered meanings, and could be regarded 'simultaneously as embodied, or historic and actual (*ḥaqīqa* and *ẓāhir*), but also as reflections of the divine immanence'.[34] There was an imaginative melding of the figurative (*majāz*) and the literal and this was 'a socioreligious habitus integral to their seeing the world'.[35] Shahab Ahmed's explanation is insightful:

> We are thus able to see with far greater urgency and clarity the constitutive centrality to the human and historical Islam of social organization, physical space, and language, and thus to address ourselves to analysing societies of Muslims in these terms. Recognizing the inherent spatiality of Revelation also brings into focus the central question of the relationship

33 Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, 13.

34 For greater detail on to the complex views and use of language in interpretation and revelation, see Mohammed M. Yunus Ali, *Medieveal Islamic Pragmatics: Sunni Legal Theorists' Models of Textual Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 234–243; and Charfi, *Islam*, 37–48.

35 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 13.

> between form and meaning that lies at the heart of all hermeneutical engagement by Muslims with Revelation.[36]

The Persianate intellectual milieu was vast and complex, yet it is increasingly clear that certain portions of the educated elite held a dynamic approach to textual interpretation, the elucidating of which will be of vital interest as we explore Sir Sayyid's view of revelation. Our understanding of this context is changing, and care must be given lest thinkers in the vanguard of Islamic modernism such as Sayyid Ahmad be dismissed simplistically as 'un-Islamic'.[37]

A deeper look at the intellectual environment, as we shall see, proves vital for assessing Sayyid Ahmad's perception of other faith traditions, in this case particularly Christianity. Although there were clearly episodes of violent domination, the story of Islam in South Asia is largely one of conviviality within the variegated religious communities. There had already been a long history of inter-religious encounter before the arrival of European Christians. There was an existing assumption that prophetically revealed texts, mentioned in neither the Bible nor the Qur'an, had been revealed to the peoples of the earth. 'In India, too', as Muhammad Hamidullah explained, 'some religious scriptures are to be found. Among those holy books are the Vedas, the Puranas, the Upanishads, and others'.[38] It was not uncommon for thinkers in this context, as Carl Ernst has carefully documented, to conceptualize religious differences through 'familiarizing techniques of translation and interpretation with standard Islamic taxonomies'.[39] This functioned as a means to assimilate Indian religions into the monotheistic fold. The theme was strongly represented in the works of Illuminationist (*ishrāqī*) philosophers, for example, who were highly influential in the Persianate realm during the Mughal Akbar's (d. 1605) reign.[40] Qur'anic passages regarding 'Christians and Jews', as Ernst has explained, were applied analogously to indigenous faith expressions. The taxonomy allowed for a more encompassing definition of 'unitarian belief' (*tawḥīd*) that could be extended to a universality of religious expression. Richard Martin and Abbas Barzegar explain this by noting the longstanding place for the acceptance of

36 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 544.

37 Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, 'Early Persianate Modernity', in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 257–298.

38 Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Emergence of Islam*, trans. Afzal Iqbal (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1993), 19.

39 Carl W. Ernst, 'The Limits of Universalism in Islamic Thought: The Case of Indian Religions', *The Muslim World* 101 (January 2011): 2.

40 Ibid., 8.

'polychromatic theism' within the boundaries of Muslim thought.[41] Simply stated, there was ample precedent to encompass a broad range of metaphysical positions within the fold of *tawḥīd*, or belief in the One God. As Shahzad Qaiser has helpfully summarized, divine unicity is not a numerical quantity, but rather a 'qualitative symbol of wholeness'.[42] It is the uncreated 'Supreme Unity' manifest in the many. This may sound like an esoteric extreme to the present-day reader, but as Seyyed Hossein Nasr has convincingly argued, thinkers like Shahāb al-Dīn Yahya ibn Habash Suhrawardī (d. 1191), the father of Illuminationism, along with other significant luminaries such as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥusayn Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), whose importance in our present study will be readily seen, 'demonstrate in their totality a very significant part of Islamic intellectuality, revealing horizons which have determined the intellectual life of many of the great sages of Islam'.[43] Sayyid Ahmad followed in the line of this intellectual legacy and his estimation of other religions in general, and of Trinitarian Christianity in particular, reflected this inherent ecumenicism.

Within the literature pertaining specifically to the study of revelation in this context, it is also important to indicate developments in the study of traditions (*ʿilm al-ḥadīth*). Daniel Brown, in his magisterial study on the subject, has made a compelling case for the centrality of this discipline within the Islamic sciences in India. During the hinge of pre-modernity and modernity, or what Reinhart Koselleck refers to as the 'saddle period', the reification of belief became a central concern in public discourse.[44] Sunna, the *imitatio Muḥammadi* narrated by tradition (systematized as Hadith [*ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*]), which stipulates the Prophet's wont in words, deeds and tacit preferences, became the means for this reification.[45] Sunna, as Brown observes,

41 Richard C. Martin and Abbas Barzegar, 'Formations of Orthodoxy: Authority, Power, and Networks in Muslim Societies', in Carl Ernst and Richard C. Martin, eds. *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 186–188.

42 Shahzad Qaiser, *The Metaphysical and Cultural Perspectives of Khawaja Ghulam Farid* (Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2012), 102.

43 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Three Muslim Sages: Avicenna, Suhrawardī, Ibn ʿArabī* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 7. See also Jamal J. Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God: The Life and Thought of 'Ala' ad-dawla as-Simnānī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 153.

44 Jan-Werner Muller, 'On Conceptual History', in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74–93.

45 For a description on the process of collection of Hadith and an extensive bibliography, see Ghassan Abdul-Jabbar, 'Collections', in Daniel W. Brown, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Concise Companion to the Hadith* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 137–159.

was the fulcrum upon which these heated religious battles turned. Grounded in the formulations of the eminent traditionalist Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 819), Sir Sayyid engaged the Biblical and Qurʾanic scriptures according to categories familiar to those in this central discipline.[46] As we shall see, his taxonomy was consistent with the internal logic of this discourse, and this was recognized among the leading interpreters of the period.

Brown's study is indicative of a renewed interest in the interrelation of Qurʾan and Sunna within modern-day scholarship. As can be seen in works by Abdullah Saeed, Aisha Musa and Farid Esack, among many others, there is an increased awareness of the centrality of tradition in defining the boundaries of religious fidelity.[47] The problem of Sunna is one of content and definition, and particularly its relation to the Hadith corpus.[48] This remains a highly contested subject among the interpretative schools in South Asia, and their contestations, though beyond the scope of this research, are less sanguine than their Western counterparts.[49] Having introduced these developments within the broader literature, we now turn attention to the scholarly writings concerned with Sayyid Ahmad's religious ideas.

3 Studies on Sayyid Ahmad Khan

Sayyid Ahmad was a prolific writer and his interests ranged across diverse fields of enquiry. No study of this important figure, however, is complete apart from the consideration of his religious ideas. I shall give concerted attention to his original writings in the next chapter, but it is appropriate first to recognize our indebtedness to earlier studies, the breadth of which attests to Sir Sayyid's central importance in the region.

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46 Joseph E. Lowry, 'Introduction', in Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, *The Epistle on Legal Theory*, trans. Joseph E. Lowry (New York: New York University Press, 2013.), xvii–xxv. For an approachable biography, see Kecia Ali, *Imam Shafiʿi: Scholar and Saint* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011).

47 Aisha Y. Musa, *Ḥadīth as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5–7; Abdullah Saeed, 'Rethinking "Revelation" as a Precondition for Reinterpretation of the Qurʾān? A Quranic Perspective', *Journal of Quranic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1999): 93–114; idem, *Interpreting the Qurʾān: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 31–33. Farid Esack, *The Qurʾan: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), 111–113.

48 Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 151–174; Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qurʾan: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 141–184.

49 Ali Usman Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority of the Past: The Ahl al-Qurʾān Movements in the Punjab* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–110.

Sayyid Ahmad's religious ideas have figured prominently in the study of nineteenth-century South Asia. Bruce Lawrence, Francis Robinson and Avril Powell have meticulously surveyed historical accounts of this context. James Lelyveld, and more recently Tariq Hasan and Shamsur Rehman Faruqi have expanded this to include subsequent generations of the Aligarh movement.[50] There are also critical studies that consider Sayyid Ahmad within British India's changing religious landscape. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, J.M.S. Baljon and K.A. Nizami, for example, have cogently assessed Sayyid Ahmad's contribution to modern Muslim thought in South Asia.[51] Daud Rahbar, working from Hartford Seminary, contributed a valuable translation of Sayyid Ahmad's exegetical principles *Taḥrīr fī usūl al-tafsīr*.[52] Also in this vein, Muḥammad Yasīn Mazhar Ṣiddīqi has brought together a cast of contemporary Indian scholarly articles on Sayyid Ahmad's commentary of the Qur'an.[53]

There are fewer works, however, that directly address Sayyid Ahmad's writings on the Bible. Soraya Hussein has provided one of the few full-length monographs in Urdu on Sayyid Ahmad's religious thought, and this includes a chapter on *Tabyīn* Parts 1 and 2.[54] Tauqeer Zia's text goes beyond this by offering an analysis of Sayyid Ahmad's theology, and a particularly helpful assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's attitudes expressed in *Tabyīn*.[55] Raymond Schaefer, while supervised by Rahbar, examined Sayyid Ahmad's use of Christian sources.[56] His study correctly identified that most of the citations are derived

50 K.A. Nizami, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1966); Avril Ann Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995); Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *From Antiquary to Social Revolutionary: Syed Ahmad Khan and the Colonial Experience* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 2006).

51 J.M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880–1960)* (Leiden: Brill, 1968); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Lahore: Minerva, 1943); idem, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957); idem, 'The 'Ulamā' in Indian Politics', in C.H. Phillips, ed., *Politics and Society in India* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).

52 Rahbar guided at least two graduate theses concerning Sayyid Ahmad: Raymond George Schaefer, 'Studies in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Use of Some Christian Scriptures in His Biblical Commentary', MA thesis (Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1966); John W. Wilder, *Selected Essays by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2006); Daud Rahbar, 'Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's Principles of Exegesis Translated from His *Taḥrīr fī usūl al-tafsīr*', *The Muslim World* 46, nos 2 and 4 (1956): 104–112, 324–335.

53 Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqi, ed. *Sir Sayyid kī tafsīr al-Qur'ān aur mābād tafsīr par uskī asrāt* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 2001).

54 Suraya Husayn, *Sir Sayyid aur uskī Ahad* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1992).

55 Tauqeer Zia, *Sir Sayyid kī dīnī shiūr* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 2005).

56 Schaefer, 'Studies'.

from a very limited number of standard Christian texts.[57] My view is closer to that of Julia Stephens, who notes that Sayyid Ahmad's writings infer a greater number of sources than those actually referenced. I have operated under the view that Sayyid Ahmad's use of citations, while important, was not intended to be conclusive. Muda Ismail Abd Rahman has also examined Sayyid Ahmad's engagement with the Bible. In his Aberdeen thesis, Rahman juxtaposed Sayyid Ahmad's religious thought with that of the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy (d. 1833). Roy composed a study of the Bible and his writings may have stimulated Sayyid Ahmad's impulse to do the same. Rahman also published two highly pertinent articles, the first concerning Sayyid Ahmad's attitude towards the Bible, and the second on Sayyid Ahmad's exegesis concerning Jesus' birth.[58] Jamal Malik has provided one of the very few responses to Sayyid Ahmad's *Tabyīn* Part 3.[59] As one can see, Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings in general, and his study of the Bible in particular, continue to garner attention.

From among these many studies, two continue to be regarded as of enduring importance: Bashir Ahmad Dar's *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* and Christian W. Troll's *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*.[60] Dar was the first to carefully trace the influence of Muslim rationalist philosophy in Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings. Troll goes further and manages to consolidate Sayyid Ahmad's manifold ideas into a theological system, or credo.[61] Dar read *Tabyīn* as polemic, subtly written but polemic nonetheless. In this light, Sayyid Ahmad is battling the Christian 'West'. Troll, however, included *Tabyīn* within Sayyid Ahmad's apologetic theology, and this

57 Julia A. Stephens, 'Ideas in Motion: Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Liberalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century India', MPhil Thesis (Cambridge University, 2006).

58 Muda Ismail Abd Rahman, 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Attitude Towards Biblical Scriptures as Reflected in His Work *Tabyīn al-Kalām fī tafsīr al-Tawrāt wa'l Injīl 'alā millat al-Islām*', *Islāmiyyāt* 13 (1992): 37–59; idem, 'The Interpretation of the Birth of Jesus and His Miracles in the Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 1 (2003): 23–31.

59 Jamal Malik, 'Islam and the Sermon on the Mount', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, no. 1 (2013): 43–56.

60 Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Institute for Islamic Culture, 1957). Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).

61 Some of these include: Christian W. Troll, 'Sayyed Ahmad Khan on Matthew 5: 17–20', *Islamochristiana* 3 (1977): 99–105; idem, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98) and His Theological Critics: The Accusations of 'Ali Baksh Khan and Sir Sayyid's Rejoinder', *Islamic Culture* 51 (1977): 261–72, and 52 (1878): 1–18; idem, 'Reason and Revelation in the Theology of Mawlana Shibli Nu'mani', *Islam and the Modern Age* 14, (1982): 104–114; idem, 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Islamic Jurisprudence', *Islamic and Comparative Law Quarterly* 2 (1982): 1–16.

allowed Troll to discern its place within Sayyid Ahmad's larger reinterpretation of Muslim theology. Drawing from a close reading of the original texts, and in the light of these previous studies, we shall revisit *Tabyīn* and explore how this exegesis sheds light on Sir Sayyid's intellectual journey and upon the ideas circulating in this dynamic environment.

4 Outline of the Chapters

Following this introduction, the second chapter sets Sayyid Ahmad within the historical milieu and considers his progress as a writer. The third chapter specifically examines our author's writings in *Tabyīn al-kalām*, and to a lesser degree in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. The fourth chapter analyses the reasons for Sayyid Ahmad's assessment of the Bible in light of his view of revelation. The fifth chapter considers Sayyid Ahmad's thought within the broader context. The final chapter serves as a conclusion to the study and indicates potential areas for further enquiry. We now briefly consider how these chapters proceed.

Chapter 2 introduces the highly charged political setting of the transition from Mughal to British rule. The intellectual arena is no less tumultuous. We pay particular attention to changes underway in the religious thought of both Indian Muslims and European Christians. The central question in India concerned the degree of authority attributed to Hadith, the implications of which affect all facets of Muslim life. We shall also present a basic chronological account of Sayyid Ahmad's life and writings in order to demonstrate how our author's intellectual progression informs his theological views.

Chapter 3 examines Sayyid Ahmad's primary writings on the Bible found in *Tabyīn al-kalām*. A latter portion of the chapter considers the way his attitude continues and changes in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*. We explore his approach to writing and pay careful attention to authorial signposts before considering substantive portions of each of *Tabyīn*'s three parts.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of Sayyid Ahmad's reading of the Bible. We argue that his attitude is shaped by a particular philosophy of knowledge. We examine the method applied by Sayyid Ahmad to categorize prophetic revelation in the Bible as concomitant with that of accepted Muslims sources, the Qur'an and Sunna. Sayyid Ahmad's valuation of the authenticity and authority of the present Bible is reconsidered in light of his view of revelation.

Chapter 5 considers Sayyid Ahmad's theology within the context of earlier Indian Muslim thinkers. This brings his approach to prophetic revelation into sharper relief and demonstrates both continuity and originality. In the second section, Sayyid Ahmad's purpose in engaging the scriptures of the 'People of

the Book' is considered. As it will be seen, his pluralism became reinforced by the assumption of the coherence of natural and prophetic revelation.

This brings us to the final chapter where we draw together these elements towards a conclusion. Here Sir Sayyid's attitude towards the Bible comes into sharper view, as does his purpose in composing the *Tabyīn*. We explore how a more nuanced understanding of Sayyid Ahmad's philosophy, or more specifically how the purposes of the transcendent creator continue to be worked out within a closed immanent frame, allow a more uninhibited criticism of supernatural phenomenon. If we have succeeded, it will be clear that Sayyid Ahmad's exegesis offers a rare glimpse into early modern deliberations on the nature of revelation.

CHAPTER 2

The *Tabyīn* in Context

Colonialism colours nineteenth-century historiography. 'There is no rupture greater in the history of Islam', as Muhammad Qasim Zaman observed, 'than that brought about by modernity'.[1] Modernity, however, as a concept or time frame, has evaded simple definition. The term is synonymous with technological progress, new ways of thinking, and notions of human perfectibility. It also has been associated with post-Enlightenment knowledge systems and the market forces that propelled the spread of European colonial hegemony. This was partially because, as Bruce Lawrence recounted, 'the Islamic world faced the crisis of science not through Darwinian logic but through European presence'.[2] But is modernity in India a product of colonialism?

In much of the academic literature, modernity appears as a unidirectional force moving from West to East. This view, however, is neither supported by the academic literature nor consistent with Sayyid Ahmad's experience. Indeed, it is precisely because of this misconception that Islamic modernism is cast as a series of lurching attempts to reshape knowledge and socio-religious institutions in the light of Western models.[3] One consequence of this sense of 'rupture' has been an overemphasis upon social and political dynamics to recast the progression of Muslim theology over the past three centuries. In this chapter, we consider the Persianate context with a wider eye and see that the Indian host community exerted a far greater degree of agency than is currently implied in the literature.

Nineteenth-century India was marked by a host of reforms in the practice and teaching of faith. The most central elements of these reforms, however, were already underway prior to British hegemony. We shall examine streams of influence that shaped Sir Sayyid's intellectual environment and drew him into a dynamic inter-generational discourse on some of the most foundational issues of faith. This first section will introduce the setting and create a backdrop against which his creative movements can be observed. In the latter half of the chapter, we shall consider Sir Sayyid's progress as a writer and scriptural exegete. Though a definitive biography on Sir Sayyid remains to be

1 Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 7.

2 Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'ān: A Biography* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 143.

3 Francis Robinson, 'Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies* 42 (2008): 259–281.

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written, space constraints forbid all but a summary account of his extensive career. Still, these broad strokes set the stage for a discussion of modernity and religion that is defined in philosophical rather than sociological and economic terms.[4]

1 The Political Setting

Sayyid Ahmad's story unfolds upon a dramatic political stage. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the modest capitulations granted to the East Indian Company (EIC) in 1609 had compounded into direct rule of the Mughal Empire, the world's most expansive and lucrative domain. Although there was recurrent resistance from the start, the 1857 uprising, alternatively called the 'Sepoy Mutiny' or 'First War of Indian Independence', endures as a watershed in Indian history marking the end of Mughal political sovereignty and the 'high noon of colonialism'.[5]

Historian Gregory Freemont-Barnes recounted that grievances against the EIC were numerous, but they became exacerbated by a perceived sense of 'evangelical imperialism'. 'Victorians', he wrote, 'unlike their profit-driven predecessors, sought not merely to rule the world but to redeem it'.[6] Rumours abounded that the British planned to consolidate power through mass conversion. Tensions were high. As Sayyid Ahmad wrote, the actual 'spark in the powder keg' was the army's procurement of rifle cartridges greased with lard – both pork and beef by some accounts – the handling of which compelled soldiers to choose between divine and earthly loyalties.

The British also interpreted the ensuing events through a religious filter. Conspiracy theories gained currency, like that of William Hunter (1840–1900), a leader in the Indian Civil Service, who claimed that Muslims – whether in Cairo, Constantinople, or Calcutta – were compelled by faith to conspire towards a restored caliphate.[7] Fearing that the uprising could stimulate similar

4 For more on modernity and the 'immanent frame', see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

5 Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, and Political Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 85–94.

6 Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Indian Mutiny 1857–58* (Oxford: Osprey, 2007), 19. Bose and Jalal correctly admonish readers not to overemphasize the role of religion in the Uprising, while agreeing that it was the lense most often applied for interpretation in the decades that followed. Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, 77–85.

7 W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen?* (London: Trübner & Co., 1871), 23–63.

trouble elsewhere, Prime Minister Palmerston ordered 'every building connected with Mahommedan tradition (including the Pearl Mosque in Agra [the Taj Mahal] and the most revered Juma Mosque [Jamia Masjid] in Delhi) be levelled to the ground without regard to antiquarian veneration or artistic predilection'.[8] Though the cataclysmic order was rescinded, thanks in part to the efforts of William Muir, the severity of the decree underscores the acute religious polarity in this setting. Sayyid Ahmad's theology was forged in this extremely charged crucible. For the Muslims of India, and the Delhi nobility in particular, waning Mughal fortunes raised important eschatological questions. Political success had been perceived as indicative of divine approval.[9] The 'end of sovereignty' that came about in 1857 signified that something had gone terribly wrong.

2 The Intellectual Environment

Muslim theology was already undergoing significant reform (*iṣlāḥ*) prior to British hegemony. The trajectory of Muslim religious thinking in the region was shaped by important developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[10] The personality most associated with this period of reform is Shāh Walī Allāh. He is regarded as the father of revivalist Islam in India and almost all Sunni schools in India today, despite their considerable differences, proudly claim him in their lineage.[11] Shāh Walī Allāh's writings provided the syllabus for Sayyid Ahmad's religious study. Prior to exploring these changes, however, it is necessary here to introduce the overarching worldview in which these reforms proceed.

The vast majority of Persianate Muslims accepted Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of *tawḥīd*/*waḥdat* as axiomatic. In pre-modern India, as Tahir Tanoli, Director of the Iqbal Academy in Lahore, has explained: 'This doctrine of the "unity of being" (*waḥdat al-wujūd* in Arabic, or *tawḥīd al-wujūd*) was seen as

8 Letter dated 9 October 1857 from the Canning Papers. Cited in David Otis Coffey, 'Admitted Truths in Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Study of William Muir, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and William Goldsack in 19th Century India'. PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2002, 23.

9 Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge, 2000), 37–41.

10 Smith, 'Ulamā' in Indian Politics', 45; Rudolph Peters, 'Idjtihad and Taqlid in 18th and 19th Century Islam', *Die Welt des Islam* 10, nos 3–4 (1980): 131–145.

11 Hassan, 'Islamic Modernist and Reformist Discourse', 182; Ahmad Dallal, 'The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750–1850', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 113, no. 3 (1993): 341–359.

obligatory for all Muslims'.[12] Widely consumed though it was, this ontological monism was not easily digestible. The 'doctrine' provided, nevertheless, a semantic framework for generations of thinkers to discuss the complex and paradoxical interrelation of the Creator and the created. This complex cosmology and associated theory of emanation accounted for how revelation entered the realm of human experience. The central question was whether and how 'everything is from Him [God]' (*hama az ust*) or 'everything is Him' (*hama ust*).[13] Consider, for example, a portion of Sayyid Ahmad's translation of Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 1240) seminal words:

> If there were not God, or were we not in the knowledge of God, then what exists would not be. So, we are doubtlessly servants (*bande*) and doubtlessly God is our Master (*mālik*). And we are indeed that same which our Master is. So, when you take the name human (*insān*) then know its essence (*aṣlīyat*). When they call you human, do not be ashamed because it has been proven to you that you and your Master are one … Hence, God has given us that by which it becomes evident that God is in us. God has gifted this to us, ergo this which is called being (*wujūd*) is shared between God and us.[14]

The metaphysical quest to understand – and to experience – how the Creator is manifest in creation progressed within the paradigm of *tawḥīd*.

For Shāh Walī Allāh, the utter differentiation between the Creator and creation, or 'master' and 'servant', was a logical impossibility. This was not, however, intended to be a licence for pantheism. As Muhammad Faruque explained,

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12 Tahir Hameed Tanoli, 'A Forgotten Debate on *Wahdat ul-Wajud* in Contemporary Perspective', in Heike Stamer, ed., *Mysticism in East and West: The Concept of the Unity of Being* (Lahore: Current Affairs, 2013), 202–204. Abdur Rehman Lucknavi (d. 1829) in *Kalimāt al-ḥaqq* (Lucknow: Munshi Nawal Kishore, 1886) forcefully claimed that the acceptance of this doctrine was obligatory for all Muslims. This position was not seriously challenged, according to Tanoli, until 1897, when Sayyid Mehr ʿĀlī Shāh (d. 1937) composed *Tehqīq ul-haq fī kalimāt al-ḥaqq*. See for example the defence put forward by a founder of the Deoband movenent, Ashraf ʿAli Thanvi in *Khuṣūṣ al-kalim fī ḥal fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* as recorded in Marcia Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify in the 20th Century: The Biographical Approaches of Maulānā Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī and Khwaja Ḥasan Niẓāmī*, Occasional Paper 79 (Islamabad: Islamic Research Insitute, 2007), 2. For a detailed description, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of Pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1979).

13 William C. Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. Mohammed Rustom et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 71–78.

14 TK, 3: 4–5. Christian W. Troll, Charles M. Ramsey, and M. Basharat Mughal, *The Gospel According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 10–11.

'some Sufis mistakenly take the cosmos for God, whereas in reality [according to Walī Allāh], it is God's manifestation through the all-expansive being that encompasses the entire cosmos'.[15] Of central concern was the need to safeguard divine transcendence in an intellectual culture that assumed a very high degree of divine immanence. Prophetic knowledge was disclosed to clarify that which could not be discovered through rational faculties alone, namely the reality of *tawḥīd*. The cosmos was divinely infused, and human nature (*fiṭra*) was inextricably enmeshed with God's nature (*fiṭrat Allāh*), and therein lies the nexus of all that can be known. The Creator and the created are more than inter-related; they are in a profound sense 'one'.

In assessing this context, it is important to note that there was considerable speculation and heated debate regarding the complexities of *tawḥīd*. Consider the thought of Shāh Ghulām ʿAlī Yaḥiā (d. 1767), a celebrated Nashbandī Mujaddidī shaykh in the traditions of Ahmad Sirhindī (d. 1624).[16] In *Kalimāt al-ḥaqq*, for example, Ghulām ʿAlī challenged the connection between emanationist cosmology and prophetic revelation set out by Shāh Walī Allāh in *Maktūb-i madanī*.[17] Here we see in the juxtaposition of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* a corrective calibration towards divine transcendence. Within this text, however, it can be seen that Ghulām ʿAlī conceives of all revelation – including the Arabic words granted to Muḥammad as Qur'an – to be mediated through natural faculties (*ṭawr al-fiṭra*). The subject continues in the writings of subsequent generations. Walī Allāh's son, Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz attempted to explain the position, but it was his brother, Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn, who provided the clearest statement on the assumed harmony (*Taṭbīq al-ārā'*) of these paradoxical positions in *Takmīl al-adhhān*. Regardless of their carefully nuanced conclusions, it is vital to see that, among the thinkers of the day, these were the highest representatives of 'orthodoxy', and they were heavily engaged in discussing the correlation between the Creator and creation, and the process of revelation. This was a cosmology that proceeded from the great philosophers such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, Ibn ʿArabī, al-Simnanī and Mulla Ṣadrā, whose works were recognised to be of the highest order.[18] Far

15 Muhammad U. Faruque, 'Sufism *contra* Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh's Metaphysics of *Waḥdat al-Wujūd*', *Journal of Sufi Studies* 5 (2016): 57.

16 Arthur Buehler, 'Mawlānā Khālid and Shāh Ghulām ʿAlī', *Journal of the History of Sufism* 5 (2006): 65–79.

17 Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, *Islamic Renaissance in South Asia (1707–1867): The Role of Shah Wali Allah and His Successors* (Islamabad: International Research Institute, 2002), 179–180.

18 Elias, *Throne Carrier of God*, 152–153; Mohammed Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 65–70; Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xxiii–xxxvi.

from static, there was an ongoing quest to understand the process by which divine knowledge enters the realm of human experience without disturbing the fine balance between transcendence and immanence.

These topics retained their currency in Sayyid Ahmad's day. Shāh Ismāʿīl (d. 1830), for example, who was also active among the Mujaddidīs, carried forward the discussion and added at least two important points that Sayyid Ahmad subsequently applied in his writings. First, he posited that the 'Unity of Being' must be qualified by the assurance that God remains ultimately (*ʿabdiyat*) apart from creation. Walī Allāh, while attempting to safeguard both 'God's transcendence and multiplicity of the cosmos', as Faruque explained, asserts that 'actual' *wujūd* belongs only to God and that contingent beings possess only 'borrowed' *wujūd*.[19] Shāh Ismāʿīl, while not rejecting the position of Shāh Ghulām ʿAlī, continued on the progression towards greater divine transcendence. Second, Shāh Ismāʿīl challenged Walī Allāh's conception of intermediary worlds through which emanating divine knowledge arrived in the human realm. Exchanges such as these draw attention to the calibre of discussion predating Sayyid Ahmad's interest in European naturalism. This was a dynamic intellectual environment and Sayyid Ahmad was actively involved with key thinkers engaged in this historic colloquy on the 'Unity of Being', an inter-generational discussion on the philosophy of religion.

The colloquy on the 'Unity of Being', or the *ʿūlamāʾ al-wujūd* to use Sayyid Ahmad's term, provides a backdrop to Sayyid Ahmad's controversial *necharī* philosophy. Sayyid Ahmad translated the Arabic *fiṭrat Allāh* (literally God's nature) as simply 'nature', or as transliterated into Urdu: *necharī*. He applied other terms as well in his writings, such as animal nature (*ḥaiwān*), or the laws of nature (*qānūn-i qudrat*), but *necharī* endured as his preferred term to describe his particular view.[20] For Sayyid Ahmad, all that can be known of Allah's nature (*fiṭrat Allāh*) is mediated through created nature (*fiṭra*), and *necharī* became his shorthand to describe this broader concept. As Hafiz Malik noted, 'In his [Sayyid Ahmad Khan's] efforts to harmonize the laws of nature with Islam, he acquired the sobriquet of *nechari* (transliterated as naturist, but also pejorative for atheist), but in his outlook he was no more of a naturist than the great *mujtahid* of India – *Shah Waliy Allah*'.[21] As now we consider, the intellectual tradition associated with Shāh Walī Allāh contains information vital for seeing Sir Sayyid within his context.

19 Faruque, 'Sufism *contra* Shariah?', 56.

20 TQ 1, 62.

21 Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 267.

3 Revelation Recorded

Shāh Walī Allāh worked from the premise that reason (*ʿaql*) and prophetic revelation (*naql*) were reconcilable.[22] Under his leadership, the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, a school begun by his father, flourished as a centre for textual scholarship.[23] Reinvigorating the ideas of the Muʿtazilīs, such as ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Asadābādī (d. 1025), Walī Allāh attributed social decay and the consequent political misfortune squarely to the teachers of religion. Their blind adherence (*taqlīd*) to tradition led to complacency and intellectual stagnation. The antidote, he claimed, was an integrative approach that combined elements from across the religious sciences. Resources from the Sunnis and the Shiʾa, the jurists and the mystics, and from the philosophers and the theologians were synthesized to derive a novel approach to scriptural interpretation.

Shāh Walī Allāh's reforms altered the trajectory of the Islamic sciences in South Asia. Aptly described as 'back to the Qurʾan, and forward with *ijtihād*', his approach marked a shift in the study of the foundational sources.[24] Pedagogy was based upon *taqlīd*, or the recollection of accepted opinions. The issue raised against this was that these were memorized without a critical knowledge of their foundations. The approach was tethered to the assumption that the founder of a legal tradition (*madhhab*) was the recipient of direct and infallible (*maʿṣūm*) guidance.[25] In Shāh Walī Allāh's estimation, however, the four historic schools of law had proven equally inadequate in providing guidance for the community. He was part of a larger intellectual revival sweeping across the Muslim world in this period that rallied for the development of a new approach drawn directly from the Qurʾan and Hadith.[26] The resulting shift

22 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xv–xxxiii.

23 The school began in protest against Emperor Aurangzeb's call for the consolidation of Ḥanafī jurisprudence into the *Fatāwā-i-ʿAlamgiri* compendium. As Bakhtāwar Khan recounted, this would 'be for all the world the standard exposition of the law, and render everyone independent of Moslem doctors'. Bakhtāwar Khan, '*Mirʾat-i-Alam*', in H.M. Elliott and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 7 (London: Trübner & Co., 1964), 160. See also Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

24 Hassan, 'Islamic Modernist and Reformist Discourse', 182. For a fuller description, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 'The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Quran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181–210; Wael B. Hallaq, 'Was the Gate of Ijtihād Closed?', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16 (1984): 30.

25 Peters, '*Idjtihad* and *Taqlid*', 131–137.

26 George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 208.

in method, from analogical reasoning (*qiyās*) to *ijtihād*, opened a way for modernist thinkers that would not have been possible without this development.

Shāh Walī Allāh's school reinvigorated the study of philosophy and scholastic theology, and this had immediate repercussions upon his view of scripture.[27] His writings demonstrate an active engagement with Muʿtazilī theologians, who held that revelation must be understood in light of two factors: divine unicity (*tawḥīd*) and divine justice (*ʿadl*).[28] They argued that to accept anything – even the divine attribute (*ṣifa*) of speech (*kalām*) – as co-eternal with God is to detract from the cardinal value of *tawḥīd*.[29] If the Qurʾan is eternal (*qadīm*), as became crystalized in Muslim orthodoxy, then 'all the events narrated therein were pre-ordained; the players in all of these events would thus all have had their fate sealed, even before birth'.[30] This degree of predestination, the Muʿtazilīs argued, negated the very possibility of divine justice. By carrying forward distinctions made by these scholastic theologians, namely that the Qurʾan was neither eternal nor uncreated, Walī Allāh differed from what is now presumed to be mainstream orthodoxy.

The Qurʾan, in Walī Allāh's estimation, could only have come into form through the rational faculties of the Prophet Muḥammad. As Walī Allāh explained in the hermeneutical treatise *Al-fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*:

> When God wished to communicate a guidance to abide till the end of the world He subdued the mind of the Prophet in such a way that in the pure heart of the Prophet He could send the Book of God in a nebulous and undifferentiated manner (*ijmālan*) … The Message comes to be imprinted in the pure heart of the Prophet as it existed in the supernal realm and thus the Prophet came to know by conviction that this is the word of God … Subsequently as the need arose well-strung speech was brought out from the rational faculties of the Prophet through the agency of the angel.[31]

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27 J.M.S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 71–78.

28 Daniel Gimaret, 'Muʿtazila', in EI², 7: 783–793. Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Muʿtazilite Qurʾān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakasharī* (*D. 538/1144*) (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 147. See also Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 3–30.

29 Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2011), 40–42.

30 Esack, *The Qurʾan*, 107.

31 Ibid., 117. An accessible Urdu translation from the Arabic is that of Maulana Muhammad Rafiq Chaudhary: Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-fawz al-Kabīr fī usūl al-tafsīr*, trans. Maulana Muḥammad Rafiq Chaudhary (Lahore: Maqtaba Qurʾāniyat, 2004), 27.

This statement is extremely important for gauging the intellectual environment. The founding voice of this bastion of Islamic scholarship posited the contingency of Prophetic revelation. This is a view severely at odds with the mainstream conception of the Qurʾan as eternal *ipsissima verba*. Though Sayyid Ahmad concurred with most of Shāh Walī Allāh's account of the revelatory process, he took the senior sage to task for suggesting that it was the content (*maḍmūn*) of revelation, rather than the actual words (*alfaẓ*) that had descended upon Muḥammad. Walī Allāh understood that 'verbal revelation occurred in the words, idiom, and style already present in the mind of the Prophet'.[32] In this assessment – by one of the most authoritative Muslim scholars in seventeenth-century India – prophets were not perceived to be passive receptors, or oracles that channel words from the beyond. Divine messengers were active participants in the revelatory process.

This constellation of scholars understood that there was an organic interrelation shared between the message and the messenger. For Walī Allāh, as Esack explains, revealed religion was a combination of 'reason and imaginative symbolization'.[33] The Qurʾan was 'begotten, not made'; and there could not be one without the other. Revelation was 'planted in the pure heart' of the Prophet, and he grew to differentiate the words of God from his own, that is: the Qurʾan from Sunna.[34] As Sayyid Ahmad wrote in *Tafsīr*, the word (*kalām*) proceeds from God and becomes enfleshed (*vo mujassam ciz hotā hai*).[35] These scholars concur that speech, as required by the historical context and the actual events of his life, was brought out from what was already planted in Muḥammad's heart. As we shall discuss later in Chapter 4, this view stimulated the vital question of timing: When was the message implanted? It also placed additional importance upon the testimony garnered from the 'circumstances of revelation' (*sha'an-i nuzūl*) for Qurʾanic interpretation. If revelation was historically conditioned and contextually specific, and the text and context were mutually informative, it can be seen how reported details compiled as Hadith are essential for deciphering the meaning of the sacred text.

The interrelation of Qurʾan and Sunna became central to these Delhi interpreters. Sunna, or Muḥammad's recorded sayings and preferences, was the primary means to reify the message of the Qurʾan and to derive the legislative traditions of jurisprudence. Such information was recorded into compendiums of Hadith (derived from the collections of *khabar* or *athar*). Some

32 Esack, *The Qur'an*, 117.
33 Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 42.
34 Ibid.
35 TQ 3, 204.

of these reports were recognized as spurious and even today there is great concern regarding the process of verification. One consequence of this was that many *'ūlamā'-i Islām* codified a distinction between Sunna and Hadith. 'Abdul Hameed Siddiqui, a modern-day Hadith specialist (*shaykh al-ḥadīth*) in Pakistan, has provided a cogent clarification by explaining that Sunna is the 'tangible form and the actual embodiment of the Will of Allah'.[36] Hadith, however, is the 'report of the words and deeds, approval or disapproval of the Holy Prophet'.[37] Hadith reports affirmed as authentic could be classified as Sunna, but there is enduring disagreement as to how these parameters may be ascertained.

There were divergent opinions concerning which areas of the Prophet's life were to be included as Sunna. Some held that Prophetic guidance pertained only to matters of religion (*dīn*), and not to worldly (*dunya*) topics such as agriculture or statecraft;[38] only authenticated Hadiths of a religious nature were deemed as imitable.[39] Others, such as Rashid Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905) of Deoband, rejected this delineation.[40] There were heated disagreements on the degree of authority established by the Prophet's example for Muslim faith and practice.[41] At the heart of the matter was the question of the nature of the Prophet, and his role vis-à-vis the Qur'an. 'Sunna', as Daniel Brown has keenly observed, 'is the fulcrum on which the central debates over religious authority turned'.[42]

The classical consensus, derived from the legacy of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shafi'ī (d. 819), defined Sunna as 'coextensive' and of equal ethical-legal authority with the Qur'an. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) wrote:

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36 'Abdul Hameed Siddiqui, 'Some Terms Explained', in *Mishkāt-ul-masābīh* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1980), xiv.

37 Ibid.

38 TK, 1: 24–25.

39 Troll, 'Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and His Theological Critics' (1977), 261–272.

40 Brannon Ingram, 'Sufis, Scholars and Scapegoats: Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and the Deobandi Critique of Sufism', *The Muslim World* 99 (2009): 478–501.

41 Usha Sanyal, 'Are Wahhabis Kafirs? Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His *Sword of the Haramayn*', in Brinkley Messick, Muḥammad Khalid Masud, and David S. Powers, eds., *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 204–214.

42 Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3. For a cogent discussion, see Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, 'The Concept of Sunna Based on the Analysis of *sīra* and Historical Works from the First Three Centuries of Islam', in Adis Duderija, ed., *The Sunna and Its Status in Islamic Law* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 13–39.

> God has but one word, which differs in the mode of its expressions. On occasions God indicates his word by the Qurʾān, on others, by words in another style, not publicly recited, and called Sunna.[43]

Both Sunna and Qurʾan are revelation (*waḥy*). The Qurʾan is rehearsed (*waḥy matlū*, from *talāwa*); Sunna is unrehearsed (*waḥy ghayr matlū*).[44] 'The distinction made here', as Brown explains, is one of form and not of substance. Sunna is not a different mode of revelation but it was transmitted differently and serves a different function'.[45] The recitation of the Qurʾan is affective, but Sunna informs the practice of Islam.

The testimony of Sunna would be undeniable, if only it could be established as authentic. More than any other person, Muḥammad was uniquely suited to explicate and even demonstrate the intricacies of fidelity to the Qurʾanic message. The Prophet would be the ideal interpreter of the Qurʾan, if only his testimony could be assured. Grave concern had arisen, however, as to whether the Prophet's voice could be authentically isolated from the chorus of testimonies transcribed in the encyclopaedic genre of Hadith. Shāh Walī Allāh was profoundly troubled by the ample discrepancies in the Hadith literature. Prior to the writings of Orientalists such as Aloys Sprenger and William Muir, Walī Allāh's school had already recognized that a critical study of Hadith was required if this 'second scripture' (to use Aisha Musa's term) was to retain its interpretative capacity and organic equivalence with the Qurʾan.[46] Sayyid Ahmad, familiar with the progression of this enquiry and likewise confronted by the same predicament came to the conclusion that ultimately 'there is no full assurance that these [Hadiths] recount the apostle's (*rasūl*) word or deed (*qawl yā fa'il*)'.[47] The Hadith, for Sayyid Ahmad, as for many Muslim thinkers in the early twentieth century, could not provide the assured testimony desired for Qurʾanic interpretation.

Delhi's Raḥīmiyya scholars also engaged in the critical study of the Qurʾan. This is most directly seen in Walī Allāh's textual critical analysis in *Al-fāwz al-kabīr*, where some ninety-four examples of textual problems are systematically itemized. These include omissions (*hazf*), substitutions (*ibdāl*) of words and phrases, order reversals (*taqdīm aur tahīr*), and unrecognizable terms

43 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 17. Quoted from Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Kitāb al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, vol. 1 (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1982), 81.

44 Esack, *The Qur'an*, 115.

45 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 16.

46 Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 4.

47 Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Pānīpatī, ed. *Maqālāt-i-Sir Sayyid*, vol. 1 (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi Adab, 1962), 70.

(*mutashābihāt*), to name but a few.[48] Walī Allāh approached the present text in full recognition that it contained minor yet tolerable flaws.[49] As will be seen in the following chapter, Sayyid Ahmad carried forward this foundational assumption, and to some extent, this framed the conviction that the texts in hand – of the Bible and the Qur'an – are the ones to be studied. These are not to be circumvented, rearranged or dismissed as tampered with and inauthentic.

A final note drawn from this intellectual environment concerns Shāh Walī Allāh's attitude towards the Bible. Walī Allāh unambiguously rejected the view that the Bible has been textually corrupted. In his estimation, it remains a source for Muslim religious guidance.[50] As Ghulām Aḥmad Harīrī detailed, Walī Allāh's affirmed four principal sources (*mūsādar*) for religious guidance were: 'the Qur'an, Hadith, *ijtihād*, and the scriptures of the Jews and Christians'.[51] Walī Allāh's *Al-fāwz al-kabīr* is one of the most frequently cited texts in Sayyid Ahmad's commentaries on the Bible and Qur'an.[52] This text, perhaps more than any other, not only helped prepare Sayyid Ahmad for critical scriptural study, but also provided a theoretical precedent for Sayyid Ahmad to affirm the Bible as a source of religious guidance. Let us now turn to trends among Christian writers in this context.

4 The British Intellectual Environment

Significant changes also were underway in Christian thought during this period. Primary among these was the prominence of the historical-critical approach to scripture, which carried extensive theological implications. Scientific studies seemed to demonstrate that the Bible did not have its facts right. Reason became pitted against faith, and doubt gradually underwent the metamorphosis from sin to ethical necessity.[53] As Oxford's Edward Pusey predicted,

48 Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-fawz al-kabīr fī usūl al-tafsīr*, trans. Maulana Muḥammad Rafiq Chaudhary (Lahore: Maqtaba Qur'āniyat, 2004), 85.

49 This is regarded as a highly delicate subject in some circles, but there are extensive works by Muslim authors on this topic. For a carefully prepared study in the South Asian context, see Shehzad Saleem, *Collection of the Qur'ān: A Critical and Historical Study of al-Farahi's View* (Lahore: al-Mawrid Publications, 2015); for a more comprehensive work, see 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, *Muʿjam al-qirā'āt*. 11 vols (Damascus: Dār Saʿd al-Dīn, 2002).

50 Walī Allāh, *Al-fawz al-kabīr*, 27.

51 Ghulām Aḥmad Ḥarīrī, *Taḥrīk tafsīr wa-mufassirīn* (Faisalabad: Malik Sons, 1971), 40–63.

52 TK, 1: 70; TQ, 1: 12, 13, 18.

53 Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of Our Religious Uncertainty* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Timothy Larsen, *Crisis in Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

German higher criticism took hold in Britain and, by the 1850s, there was open discussion on the historicity of foundational elements of the Christian faith.

The publication of *Essays and Reviews* in the early 1860s brought academics and clergy into a heated public battle over the nature of scripture.[54] The mainstream view, informed by works such as William Paley's *Natural Theology*, presented scripture as internally consistent and reconcilable with natural observation. At the heart of the matter was the question of whether the Bible 'is the word of God', or whether it 'contains the word of God'.[55] It was a heated public debate amongst Christians that did not escape the headlines in India's English-language periodicals, and soon became common knowledge in the local bazaar.

4.1 *Christian Missionaries and 'The Mohammedan Controversy'*

Whether it was the Kantian 'noble quest to know' that kindled the study of ancient manuscripts, or some sense of civilizational manifest destiny, there was a correlation between the European study of the Orient and the colonialist project.[56] The character of this encounter was further complicated by the missionary enterprise, which was rapidly expanding during this period. There was a growing sentiment among British Christians that imperial expansion into Muslim lands was a matter of eschatological fulfilment.[57] British missionary societies were somewhat of a novelty, but the trend steadily gained momentum, particularly after the 1857 uprising. At times it became difficult to distinguish the work of missionaries from that of evangelical government employees, such as William Muir. The increase in overt proselytism stimulated a reciprocally spirited response. The ensuing writings and descriptions of these zealous engagements became known, as titled by Muir, 'The Mohammedan Controversy'. The exchanges, printed and broadly distributed, sensationalized the events in the public mind.

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54 Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 31–33.

55 Joseph L. Atholtz, 'The Mind of Victorian Orthodoxy: Anglican Response to "Essays and Reviews", 1860–1864', *Church History* 51 (1982): 186–197.

56 See E. Beasley, *Empire as the Triumph of Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005); Peter van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Robert Irwin, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

57 Andrew N. Porter, 'Evangelicalism, Islam, and Millennial Expectation in the Nineteenth Century', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 3 (2000): 111–118. See also Jeffrey Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818–1940* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Carl Pfander was the most prominent voice amongst the missionaries in the so-called controversy. A German missionary working with the Church Mission Society (CMS) in Agra, Pfander actively sought to engage Muslims in religious discussion. On several occasions, he couriered Bibles and pamphlets to a number of leading Muslims in the area such as Nūr al-Ḥasan, the Arabic instructor at the College in Agra, and to Sayyid Ahmad, then sub-judge at the local court.[58] Pfander's invitations, however, remained largely unanswered for several years until there was a small stream of conversions to Christianity that prompted a more dramatic response. Two of these were of particularly high profile, namely Ram Chandra, who was a respected faculty member of Delhi College, and Chaman Lal, surgeon to the Mughal Emperor. Both were baptized in St James' Church in 1852, causing considerable commotion.[59] Reports trickled in from across India of similar conversions, including that of a EIC magistrate turned Christian apologist named 'Abdullāh Athīm in 1853. Pfander had thrown down the gauntlet, and a strong reply was given. Indeed, the response has coloured Muslim-Christian engagement in India ever since.

After two years of literary exchanges, Maulānā Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī (d. 1891) challenged Pfander in 1854 to a public debate (*munāẓarah*). It was assumed that this would be a predictable affair where a set of rather standard topics would be formally addressed.[60] But this was not the case. Raḥmat Allāh diverted all discussion to a singular issue: historical-critical arguments composed by European Christians documenting the corruption of the Bible. 'It seems probable indeed', as Avril Powell concluded, 'that Raḥmat Allāh's impressive citation from European theological and historical literature was unprecedented among scholars anywhere in the Muslim world'.[61] Sources had been collected from the Agra and Calcutta college libraries and consolidated into a calculated onslaught. The result was shock and awe.[62] Though Raḥmat Allāh differentiated between 'atheist' (*mulḥidīn*) Germans such as

58 Christine Schirrmacher, 'The Influence of Higher Bible Criticism on Muslim Apologetics in the Nineteenth Century', in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, ed. Jacques Waardenburg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 274.

59 Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 131.

60 E.M. Wherry, *Islam and Christianity in India and the Far East* (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 157–160.

61 Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 131.

62 It was previously assumed that Raḥmat Allāh's anglophone assitant Wazīr Khān had travelled to Britain to acquire the books, but CMS archival evidence consulted in this research lends validity to Powell's estimation that the resources were readily available in India. As Pfander wrote, 'All of these opponents have been brought up in the Calcutta Government College, know English well, and are acquainted with English infidel writers'. Carl Gottlieb Pfander, Letter to Reverend H. Venn, 1854, CMS Archive, London.

David Friedrich Strauss and Ferdinand Christian Baer and mainstream British Christians such as Thomas Hartwell Horne, Nathaniel Lardner and William Paley, still he refused to budge from one single point, namely that whatever revelation had once been gathered in the Bible was now corrupted (*muḥarraf*) and the revelation interposed with erroneously subjective interpretations (*taḥrīf al-maʿānī*).[63] The Bible in its present form, Raḥmat Allāh insisted, was altered beyond reliability.

'The Mohammedan Controversy' sets Sayyid Ahmad's attitude towards the Bible and Christians in stark relief from those who sided with Raḥmat Allāh. Sayyid Ahmad remained aloof from the debate proceedings, and he refrained from publicly addressing this subject. His first written response occurs in *Tabyīn*, where he systematically addressed the same sources and issues brought forth in the debate, and yet reached very different conclusions from those of Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī.

5 Sayyid Ahmad's Life and Works

Let us now consider a brief biographical summary of Sayyid Ahmad's life and an overview of his religious writings. Sayyid Ahmad's life and progress as an author has been divided into two major phases: the earlier from 1817 to 1857, and the later from 1858–1898. I shall carry forward with this appropriate division and limit my comments to issues pertinent to our present study.[64]

5.1 *A Sound Start*

Sayyid Ahmad (1817–1898) was raised at the heart of Mughal Delhi. Both of his grandfathers were personal friends of Akbar Shāh II and the family enjoyed a prominent place at the waning imperial court. Biographies by Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī and George Graham have correctly emphasized the formative influence upon the young Sayyid of his grandfather, Khwāja Farīd ud-Dīn Ahmad, who served as the Minister of Finance and taught mathematics at the Calcutta Madrasa, the Muslim counterpart to the EIC's Fort William College.[65]

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63 For an extensive list, see Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 232.

64 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 28–58.

65 Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed: A Biographical Account of Sir Sayyid*, trans., K.H. Qadiri and David J. Matthews (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1979), 1, 4. Baljon, perhaps building upon a note from Graham, speculated that they were of the 'party of Ali' since the family fled from the Umayyad persecution. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 5–6; George Farquhar Irving Graham, *The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1885), 5. Although Sayyid Ahmad was clearly associated with the Sunnis, it is

The family also held prestigious positions among Delhi's spiritual elite. Sayyid Ahmad's father, Mir Muttaqī, was a devout initiate of Shāh Ghulam ʿAlī (d. 1824), the *khalīfa* of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidīyya. Sayyid Ahmad's maternal uncle, Khwaja ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn (d. 1855) became the *khalīfa* of this extremely prominent order, one that counted Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) and Shāh Walī Allāh among its illustrious initiates. Sayyid Ahmad was related to Sirhindī through his paternal ancestry, and he held him in the highest regard, esteeming him as 'my Shaykh'. He maintained strong emotional ties to the shrine (*ziyārat*) in Sirhind, a *qasbah* in Punjab some 250 kilometres from Delhi, to which he often returned throughout his life.[66] Another paternal uncle, Shāh Fida Ḥussain (d. 1843), was a celebrated master of the Rasūlshāhī branch of the order and a highly regarded teacher of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's (d. 1240) *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, and other texts on 'the unity of Being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*).[67]

This was a privileged upbringing. Sayyid Ahmad lived in the home of his maternal grandfather, Khwāja Farīd, at the heart of the Mughal capital. The *haveli* was frequented by the city's elite. The British Resident, General David Ochterlony, and the Bengali intellectual Ram Mohan Roy, for example, visited repeatedly during his youth and both made lasting impressions.[68] It is important to note that Sayyid Ahmad's earliest encounters with the British was not at the end of a sword or in a heated debate, but rather in the guise of a family friend who was deeply versed in his local culture and mother tongue. Ram Mohan Roy founded Hindu College in 1817, not far from its Muslim and Christian counterparts in Calcutta, all of which were to some degree forerunners of Sayyid Ahmad's educational vision. Roy had translated portions of the

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interesting to note his desire to rise above these differences. One example of this is that he repeatedly attached reverential titles both to the twelve Imams and to Fāṭima, in line with Shiʿī sensitivities.

66 Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Pānīpatī, *Maktūbat Sir Sayyid*, vol. 3, 2 (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-ye Adab, 1985), 44. Sayyid Ahmad's early socialization and religious education were influenced by a society with deeply imbedded spiritual values. Some posit that his family, through Khwāja Farīd's Kashmiri ancestry, were instrumental in introducing Ibn ʿArabī's thought in South Asia by embracing the guidance of Mir Sayyid ʿAlī Ḥamdānī. See Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, 'Contextualizing Sufism and Rishism in Kashmir', in *Islam in Kashmir: A Study of Prominent Sufis and Rishis* (Srinagar: Sheikh Mohammad Usman, 2015), 38–39; Jamal J. Elias, 'A Second ʿAli: The Making of Sayyid ʿAli Hamadani in Popular Imagination', *The Muslim World* 90 (2007): 395–420.

67 Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 12. Gulfishan Khan, 'Asar al-Sanadid: Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Representations of Sufi Life of Shahjahanabad (Delhi)', *Indian Historical Review* 36 (2009): 91.

68 For a colourful description, see William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2008), 66.

Upanishads, Vedas, Qur'an and Bible, and he seems to have served to some degree as a model for Sayyid Ahmad.

Despite its privileged position, the family came under financial strain soon after the demise of Sayyid Ahmad's father in 1837. The young Sayyid Ahmad had expressed keen interest in medicine, but the downturn in the family's fortunes necessitated his immediate employment. He begun work at the age of eighteen as a clerk in the EIC Anglo-Mohamedan court officiated by his uncle Maulānā Khalīlullāh Khan.[69] His diligence and acumen were quickly recognized and within two years he was appointed as Deputy Munshi (Sub-Judge), and from this position he gradually rose to the highest levels attainable by Indians within the EIC.

Sayyid Ahmad's early tenure with the EIC in Agra and Fatḥpūr-Sīkrī was marked by a keen interest in Mughal history. In Fatḥpūr-Sīkrī, he was quartered in what were possibly the very chambers where the Emperor Akbar had propounded his vision for *Dīn-i ilāhi*, as will be further discussed below.[70] Sayyid Ahmad frequently would have walked past 'Akbar's Church' in neighbouring Agra, the Catholic Cathedral blessed by the great Mughal in 1598.[71] Sayyid Ahmad produced several translations and smaller works on Mughal history during this time. The first, printed in 1838, was *Jām-i jam*, a study of the Mughal royal lineage from Timūr (Tamerlane) to Akbar Shāh II. He also crafted a fragmentary translation of *Ā'īn-i Akbarī*, an account Emperor Akbar's rule composed by his vizier Abu'l Faḍl (d. 1602).[72]

Sayyid Ahmad's writings turned directly to religion shortly thereafter, but his interest in Mughal history continued over the subsequent decades, as is seen in his publication of *Darbār-i Akbāri* and *Tūzuk-i Jahāngīrī*, which were published concomitantly with *Tabyīn al-kalām* between 1862 and 1865. The significance of this overlap between history and religion is easily missed, as it was by the celebrated poet Mirza Ghalib (d. 1869). Sayyid Ahmad had requested that the poet compose couplets to adorn the translations, but Ghalib refused and quipped: 'Railway tracks have been laid, and steam engines are moving on

69 Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 30.

70 Faruqi, *Princes of the Mughal Empire*, 24–34.

71 John Rooney, *The Hesitant Dawn: Christianity in Pakistan 1780–1886* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Centre, 1984), 39–42. Rooney recounts that 'over a thousand souls' were baptized there. Jahāngīr extended Akbar's religious policies and supported the establishment of a Christian school, where three of his nephews were educated and publicly baptized in 1610. It is chronicled that Jahāngīr and his bride Nūr Jahān, the inspiration for the Taj Mahal, attended church services in Lahore on multiple occasions.

72 For an extensive list of Sayyid Ahmad's writings see Kabir Ahmad Khan, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Select Bibliography', in Abdul Ali and Sayyid Ahsan, eds, *Contribution of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to Islamic Studies*, (Aligarh: Aligarh Universtiy Press, 2004), 171–226.

them; [how] is your imagination still coloured by the time of Akbar?'[73] Perhaps Ghalib did not see the connection, but Sayyid Ahmad believed that there were lessons, philosophical and practical, that the British regime could learn from that period of Mughal grandeur when representatives from the realm's religions sat together in consultation.

Āthār al-ṣanādīd, one of these early historical writings completed in 1847, contains Sayyid Ahmad's first Biblical citations.[74] The inclusion of extensive Biblical quotations seems out of place in this 1847 work on Mughal architecture, but less so when seen against the backdrop of this persistent interest in Akbar's religious experiments.[75] Though it is highly probable that our author was familiar with Ram Mohan Roy's writings on the Bible published in 1820, the reference confirms Sayyid Ahmad's engagement with the Bible by at least 1847, long before the 'Great Debate' in 1854 and the war in 1857.

This early phase was also characterized by a growing interest in the study of religion. While in Agra and nearby Fatḥpūr-Sīkrī, Sayyid Ahmad was tutored by Maulānā Nūr al-Ḥasan (d. 1868), a leading Naqshbandī *ʿālim* and Professor of Arabic at Agra College. Two works produced under al-Ḥasan's tutelage are noteworthy here. In 1839, Sayyid Ahmad penned a short biographical piece on the Prophet titled *Jilāʾ al-qulūb bi-dhikr al-maḥbūb* (Polishing of the Hearts by the Remembering of the Beloved). The text is the earliest glimpse of what became an enduring process of demystifying the life of the Prophet.[76] He also translated into Urdu portions of Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz's (son of Shāh Walī Allāh) *Tuḥfah-i ithnāʾ ʿasharī*, a generous response to recriminations levied by Shiʿī scholars in Lucknow against the first four caliphs (*rāshidūn*).[77] This was a pressing matter, and escalated tensions had resulted in the expulsion of all Sunni courtiers by the Nawab of Oudh. In general, Sayyid Ahmad's writings in this phase demonstrate his early efforts to grapple with the boundaries of India's variegated Muslim community and their contested accounts of history.

This early period was also marked by a growing interest in the European 'new sciences'. Between 1844 and 1849, Sayyid Ahmad worked extensively with John James Moore and the Agra School-Book Society, which oversaw the

73 Faruqi, *From Antiquary to Social Revolutionary*, 13. Quoted from Asad Allah Khan, *Kuliya-i Ghalib* (Karachi: Pakistan Academy, 1964), 80–81.

74 C.M. Naim, 'Syed Ahmad and His Two Books Called , *Āthār al-ṣanādīd*', *Modern Asian Studies* 45 (2011): 669–708; Khan, 'Asar al-Sanadid'.

75 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Āthār al-ṣanādīd* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 2007). Biblical references are found on pp. 33 and 34, and given the honoured first position in the bibliography on p. 29.

76 For a more thorough treatment of this work, see Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 3–27.

77 Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 31.

translation of English books into vernacular languages.[78] The impact of these encounters upon his ideas was most clearly seen in the reversal (*rajuwāt*) of his earlier claim in 1847 that the sun orbits the earth, which he corrected in 1848 in *Qaul-i matin dar ibtal-i harkat-i zamin* (Sound Argument in Refutation of the Theory of Revolution of the Earth). It was an epistemological crisis. As he later recalled, the experience was nothing short of a conversion – an awakening – to the natural sciences (*ḥayawān ko kabūl kiā*).[79] The term *ḥayawān* (animal kingdom) is indicative of his churning interaction with English and Arabic writings. The chosen term was possibly inspired by Abū ʿUthman al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 886) and his *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*, an extensive series intended to adduce divine existence and wisdom from nature.[80] Although not referenced by name, as was common at the time, there are echoes of al-Jāḥiẓ in Sayyid Ahmad's works, such as the title of his journal *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, which is identical to that of a book by al-Jāḥiẓ.[81] The title *Tabyīn al-kalām* may hold a degree of inspiration from Jāḥiẓ's *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*.[82] Jāḥiẓ sought to challenge the 'mythology, blind imitation, and non-orthodoxy' prevalent in his day, and this became Sayyid Ahmad's mission henceforth, as is seen in the writings that followed.[83]

78 Wilder, *Selected Essays*, 27. Founded in 1817, the School-Book Society supported many of the early experiments with the 'new sciences' in institutions such as Maulvi Aminullah's Calcutta Madrasa where Sayyid Ahmad's grandfather had taught mathematics. Sayyid Ahmad remained actively involved, and the project rendered thousands of pages into several Indian vernacular languages.

79 Alasdair Macintyre, 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3–23. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111–136.

80 Jamāl F. el-ʿAṭṭār, 'The Political Thought of al-Jahiz with Special Reference to the Question of Khilafa (Imamate): A Chronological Approach', PhD diss. (University of Edinburgh, 1996), p. 335. See also A.S.A. Haleem, *Chance or Creation?: God's Design in the Universe* (London: Garnet, 1995), 22; Charles Pellat, *The Life and Works of Jahiz: Translations of Selected Texts*, trans. D.M. Hawke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

81 There are many possible Muslim examples from which Sayyid Ahmad may have drawn inspiration, and that is precisely the larger point being made. Sheila McDonough and Mushirul Hasan identified the writings of Abū ʿAlī ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) to be of central importance for Sayyid Ahmad Khan, but Miskawayh (and Ibn ʿArabī who, like Miskawayh, authored a work titled *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) proceeded according to the chain of thinkers who seriously pondered the testimony of what could be observed in creation.

82 Though mere conjecture, one finds it interesting that Sayyid Ahmad reproduced the uncommon spelling identical to that of Jāḥiẓ's text as found in the Aligarh library. That is, he writes '*tab'īn*', with the *hamza*, rather than the common spelling that is rendered as '*tabyīn*'.

83 El-ʿAṭṭār, 'Political Thought of Al-Jahiz', 335.

Before his naturalist position crystalized, however, there was another important phase of development. This was a period of concerted religious study. In 1846, Sayyid Ahmad was reassigned to Delhi, where he would remain until 1856. Though he was not formally groomed as a cleric, Sayyid Ahmad was tutored during these days by some of Delhi's most prestigious luminaries. He sat under the same constellation of teachers who instructed Rāshid Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905) and Muḥammad Qasim Nanautawī (d. 1880), for example, who were the founders of what became the bastion of traditionalism in South Asia, *Dār al ʿulūm* Deoband.[84] Gangohī's early education prepared him to become a religious functionary, a *maulana* or *imam*, while Sayyid Ahmad was an administrator and judge in 'Anglo-Mohammedan' law, but in Delhi their trajectories converged when they sat under the tutelage of the masters.[85]

Sayyid Ahmad cultivated the disciplines of a life-long learner. The tutoring that had begun in Agra in 1838 had prepared him for a more rigorous academic training in Delhi. Though already employed in the courtroom, Sayyid Ahmad poured over the principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in texts such as *Misl-i qudūrī*, *Sharh-i vaqāya*, *Shāshī* and the *Nūr al-anwār* with Maulānā Navazish ʿAlī and Ṣadr al-Dīn Azurdah, Delhi's most senior mufti.[86] He studied the Qur'an and Hadith under Mamluk ʿAlī Nanautawī and Maulānā Makhṣūṣullāh (d. 1856), the son of Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn, who was the grandson of Shāh Walī Allāh and head of the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya.[87] He studied Hadith and read from the *Mishkāt-ul masābīḥ*, *Jamiʿ-i Tirmīdhī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. The most cited of these in Sayyid Ahmad's work is the *Mishkāt al-masābīḥ*, which was the collection of choice at the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, and was translated into Urdu by Shāh Muḥammad Isḥāq, the son-in-law of Shāh ʿAbd al-Azīz.[88] To have a sense of the calibre of this setting, it is worth recalling that Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn, son of Shāh Walī Allāh, was regarded as the 'expert' on philosophy, and he was the first to translate

84 Barbara Daly Metcalf, 'Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India', in Kenneth W. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 229–240. Brannon Ingram, 478–501. Gangohī and Nanautawī studied under Shāh ʿAbd al-Ghani, the son of Shāh Walī Allāh and father of Shāh Ismāʿīl.

85 Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority*, 44–47.

86 Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui, *Political Islam and the Arab Uprising: Islamist Politics in Changing Times* (New Delhi: Sage, 2017), 115–116.

87 Ghazi, *Islamic Renaissance*, 181.

88 *Mishkāt al-masābīḥ* (*A niche for lamps*) is an expanded version of al-Baghawi's *Masabih al-Sunna* by Muhammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh Khatib al-Tabrizī (d. 1341).
For a current edition, see Shaykh Walī-ud-Dīn Moḥammad bin ʿAbdullah al-Khaṭīb al-ʿUmarī al-Tabrizī, *Mishkāt-ul-masābīḥ: kitāb-ul-imān aur kitāb-ul-tahārah, Ahadith No. 1–563* (Lahore: Islamic Foundation, 1980).

the Qur'an into Urdu.[89] Though little is known of Makhṣūṣullāh beyond his affinity with the early Ahl-i Ḥādīth movement, he was reputedly conversant in English and an avid student of Hebrew, some of which he taught to students like Sayyid Ahmad at Delhi's Jamia Masjid.

It was also during this time of intensive religious study in Delhi that Sayyid Ahmad became acquainted with Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpurī (1816–1887), a leading scholar of *tafsīr*, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and early Muslim history. He tutored Sayyid Ahmad in Arabic literature in texts such as *Maqāmāt-i ḥarīrī* and *Sab'a-i mu'āllaqa*. In 1861, following the war of 1857, Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan joined Sayyid Ahmad in Ghazipur and contributed to all aspects of his literary production, subsequently accompanying him to Aligarh, where he remained an integral contributor to Sayyid Ahmad's literary work until his departure for Lahore in 1870.[90] As the senior scholar and the overseer of the printing, Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan would have been directly involved in the preparation of *Tabyīn al-kalām*.[91] Thus, even if Sayyid Ahmad were himself found wanting in sufficient religious training, the guidance of Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan, one of the prime collaborators in the *Tabyīn* project, more than adequately compensated for any shortcomings.

Styled as his 'Wahhabi days', Sayyid Ahmad published several short treatises from Delhi that are indicative of his thinking during this time. There were heated exchanges about the principles of Sunna in general, and the adherence to schools of law in particular. In one exchange with Azurdah, the chief mufti (*Ṣadr al-ṣudūr*) of Delhi, Sayyid Ahmad exclaimed, 'I swear by God in whose hands rests my life, if a person does not eat a mango for the reason that the Prophet did not eat it then the angels will kiss his feet on his (death) bed'.[92] Like many of his contemporaries, Sayyid Ahmad sought to restore the practice of Islam to the original purity displayed in accounts of the life and sayings of the Prophet. He later arrived at a very different approach, but at this stage he was prepared to challenge even the *Ṣadr al-ṣudūr*. Embroiled in these turbulent debates, in 1849 he composed *Kalimāt al-ḥaqq*, a booklet emphasizing the need for the reification of Sunna along the lines advocated in Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī's (d. 1831) *Ṭarīka-i muḥammadiyya*. In 1850, he composed *Rāh-i Sunna*

89 TK, 1: 59. Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 33.

90 Shaykh Naẓīr Husayn, *Maulvi Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī: Arabi zaban ke adīb wa shāhir* (Azamgarh: Mū'ārif, 1990), 199–208. For other pertinent works, see Madīr Urdu Dairāh Mū'ārif Islamia, Punjab University, Lahore.

91 Research on the publishing industry in India indicates that works, including translations, were often prepared in groups. For a description of a small printing establishment in this period in a similar context, see Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Nawal Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2007).

92 Pānīpatī, *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, vol. 5, 290.

dar radd-i bidʿa (The Path of the Sunna in the Rejection of Innovation), which echoed Shāh Ismāʿīl's Persian tract condemning saint veneration as an erroneous innovation (*bidʿa*). Shāh Ismāʿīl provided the inspiration for Barelvī's militant Mujahidin Movement, of which Sayyid Ahmad was an ardent supporter at this time. Two of his other religious writings printed in 1853 are also informative. These are both translations from Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111) *Kīmiyā'-i saʿādat* and *Namiqah dar bayān-i masʾalah-i taṣauwur-i shaykh. Namiqah*, as Bruce Lawrence observed, 'provides a clue to the change going on in Sir Sayyid's mind', for here we see him defending a traditional mystical practice even while advancing 'incipient rationalist' arguments.[93] The choice of subject reveals an on-going attempt to balance the competing visions for religious fidelity of his Mujaddidī Sufi upbringing and the reforms of the *Ṭarīka-i muḥammadiyya* that seemed to radicalize his thinking as a young man.

This first period of Sayyid Ahmad's writing career draws to a natural close with his appointment to Bijnour in 1856. It was there that he endured the cataclysmic events of 1857, the gravity of which must be fully emphasized.[94] Once Sayyid Ahmad was finally able to return to Delhi, several weeks after the cessation of fighting, he found his family decimated and his home ransacked. His uncle and brother had been executed and his mother succumbed to a combination of starvation and dehydration. As Sheila McDonough has appropriately summarized, he had 'survived to see the end of his world'.[95] Sayyid Ahmad contemplated emigration, as did many of his social standing, but felt compelled to remain and work towards the reconstruction of his war-torn homeland. His faithful service was later recognized in 1888, when he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India.

5.2 *Upward and Onward*

Sayyid Ahmad's most substantive religious writings were composed in the period after 1857. Soon after the war, Sayyid Ahmad was assigned to Meerut, and from there he composed several works aimed at rapprochement with the British. He composed a personal account of the siege at Bijnour, which was published in 1858 and translated into English. He also wrote *Asbāb-i baghāwat-i Hind*, which later, in 1873, was translated as *Causes of the Indian Revolt*. From Sayyid Ahmad's account, there was rampant suspicion among the people that

93 Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements', 72–79.

94 Hafeez Malik, *Political Profile of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Documentary Record* (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture, and Civilization, 1982), 9.

95 Sheila McDonough, *The Authority of the Past: A Study of Three Muslim Modernists* (Chambersburg, Pa.: American Academy of Religion, 1970), 15.

the British were intent on the mass conversion of India to Christianity. He further emphasized that the revolt, contrary to William Hunter's findings, was neither pre-meditated nor reflective of the Muslim community's resolve. He published three pamphlets as part of a series entitled *Accounts of the Loyal Mohamedans of India* that highlighted Muslim service and loyalty to the British crown. From Meerut, he also composed a short but important religious pamphlet called *Taḥqīq-i lafẓ-i naṣārā* (Enquiry on the Word '*naṣārā*'). Portions of this were later included in *Tabyīn* (Part 3).

5.2.1 Composition of *Tabyīn al-kalām*

A thorough description of *Tabyīn* will be presented in the following chapter, but it is helpful here to introduce the circumstances of its composition. The first portions of *Tabyīn al-kalām* were published from Meerut. Although it is highly probable that preparations were underway before 1857, it is evident that Sayyid Ahmad commenced concerted work on the project prior to his arrival at Ghazipur in 1862. This accounts for his exceedingly high literary output that would not be otherwise feasible in such a short time. According to William Butler's first-hand account, by 1859 Sayyid Ahmad's copy of the Gospel of Matthew 'was annotated on nearly every page'.[96] In that same year, Charles Wesley Judd in Muradabad also noted that Sayyid Ahmad was compiling theological resources and that he had provided some from his own library. These accounts further support the conclusion that *Tabyīn* Part 3, *The Holy Gospel of Matthew from the Opening Chapter to Chapter Five* (*Injīl-i muqaddas Mattī az bāb-i awwal tā bāb-i panjom*) was in actuality the first in the series to be written. As will be considered in the next chapter, this is important because these early pages provide a clear statement of the author's vision and purpose in writing an 'exegetical commentary (*tafsīr*) on the divine word (*kalām ilāhī*) that comprises the Old Testament (*ahad-i 'atīq*) and New Testament (*ahad-i jadīd*)'.[97] So we see that the composition of *Tabyīn* began in earnest at Meerut and came to fruition in Ghazipur.

C.M. Naim, a specialist in Urdu literature, has drawn attention to Sayyid Ahmad's approach to writing, and it is helpful to make a note of this here. One should not forget that our author owned and operated a printing concern for much of his adult life. This affected the way he went about his work. Naim explains that, while print entrepreneurs realized the power of this technology

96 Alan M. Guenther, 'Christian Responses to Ahmad Khan's Commentary on the Bible', *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6 (2010): 74. Guenther cites Henry Mansell, 'The New Muhammedan School of Thought', in *The Indian Evangelical Review: A Quarterly Journal of Missionary Thought and Action* 17 (Apr. 1891): 441; W. Butler, 'India – Reports from Rev. Dr. Butler', *Missionary Advocate* 16 (1860): 51.

97 TK, 3: 15.

to broadly disseminate ideas, they also were keenly aware of the more pedestrian challenges of sustaining a business enterprise.[98] Publishing large volumes incurred greater financial risk. It was more viable to print shorter pamphlets, which could be serialized to draw additional customers. This approach to publishing shines additional light upon the process by which *Tabyīn al-kalām* arrived at its final form. It is important to recall that the first readers did not encounter the pages of *Tabyīn* as a bound work such as is now available. The portions were not presented by the author as a complete work, but rather as serialized portions of a larger project. Instalments were printed for limited circulation, and then subsequently rearranged and bound according to the author's intended final form. These were collated into parts (*hissa*) and gathered into volumes (*jild*).

It is also important to consider who was working with Sayyid Ahmad at Ghazipur. Along with Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan, Sayyid Ahmad added Maulānā Ināyat Rasūl Chirīakotī and a Jewish man named Sālim to help with the *Tabyīn* project.[99] Asghar 'Abbas, Director of the Sir Sayyid Academy at Aligarh University, underscored the importance of Chīriākotī's role in his introduction to the 2004 reprint of *Tabyīn*.[100] Although a full biography could not be located, we know that Chīriākotī presided (*sadārat*) over the Committee Striving for the Educational Progress of Muslims established in Benares 1870. This committee was central to the fledgling Aligarh movement and the inaugural meeting was marked by the first edition of the *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* journal (*The Mohammedan Social Reformer*). We also know that the two remained close throughout Sayyid Ahmad's life. In correspondence dated 1893, five years before Sayyid Ahmed's death, Sayyid Ahmad affectionately stated his regard for Chīriākotī as a religious thinker and as a valuable scholarly resource. 'Send me three more examples from the Bible', he wrote. 'Oh, that you put those books in a trunk and ship these to me here'.[101] Though the contents of the 'trunk' remain a mystery, the letters reveal the length and tenor of their relationship. Though further research is needed, Chīriākotī's contribution seems to be more extensive than previously recognized.

Collaboration with Chīriākotī helps to explain references to Jewish writings not found in the European sources cited in *Tabyīn*.[102] Sayyid Ahmad referred

98 Naim, 'Syed Ahmad and His Two Books', 7.

99 Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 75–76.

100 *Tabyīn*, Introduction (*Peish alfāẓ*).

101 Pānīpatī, *Maktūbat*, vol. 1., 376–379. Four letters addressed to Chīriākotī are reprinted in this collection.

102 TK, 1: 244. Jonathan Kearney, 'The Torah of Israel in the Tongue of Ishmael: Saadia Gaon and His Arabic Translation of the Pentateuch', *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 33–34, (2010–11): 55–75; Richard C. Steiner, *A Biblical Translation in the Making: The*

to the works of Saʿadia Gaon (d. 942) and Rashi (Shlomo Yitzchaki, d. 1105). As Asghar ʿAbbas recounted, Chīriākotī was an aficionado of all things Jewish. During his association with Calcutta's Arab Jews, Chīriākotī had not only learned Hebrew but had also taken on Jewish dietary habits, ritual prayer, and dress – which included a signature red fez. He also carried a reference letter to facilitate entry into local synagogues, such as the one in Delhi. This may well have proved instrumental in their enlisting Sālim's participation in the project, who could have provided additional insight into Jewish sources and perspectives, and also assistance in managing the Hebrew typeset.[103]

Chīriākotī's writings also shed light on Muslim sources available to Sayyid Ahmad. *Bushra*, one of this Hebraist's only extant works, contains many ideas that closely parallel those of Sayyid Ahmad. In it, Chīriākotī emphasized the importance of Biblical study for understanding the development of Muslim theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) and rebuked Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) and ʿAbd al-Karīm Shahrestānī (d. 1153), representatives of the Sunni and Shiʿī traditions respectively, for their failure to recognize the importance of studying earlier revelation – in Hebrew – for accurate Qur'anic exegesis.[104] It can be seen that Chīriākotī, like Fā'id al-Ḥasan, was also an important research assistant whose support was enlisted not only in the composition of *Tabyīn*, but throughout Sayyid Ahmad's career.

Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan was another important companion during this period. To date, his steady influence in the development of Sayyid Ahmad's work in Ghazipur has been completely overlooked, and it is worthy of further study. Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan was a leading Arabist in his generation. He published studies on classical commentators on the Qur'an, such as ʿAbd Allāh al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505). He was also highly regarded for his works on early Islam such as *Diwān al-Ḥamāsa* (1877) and *Ḥāsan bin Thābit* (1878).[105] In this light, it can be seen that Sayyid Ahmad did not compose the *Tabyīn* in isolation, but rather in the company of some very learned companions.

This companionship may have influenced the initial public response to the project. It is important to note that early responses to *Tabyīn al-kalām* from

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Evolution and Impact of Saadia Gaon's Tafsīr (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 94–96, 100–101; see also Jonathan R. Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel and the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 118–124.

103 Ināyat Rasūl Chirīakotī, *Bushra* (Aligarh: Sharvani Press, 1939). Chīriākotī's father worked at the Ghazipur court and introduced him to Sayyid Ahmad in 1861.

104 Ibid., 31. For a recent example of this view, see Majid Daneshgar, *Studying the Qur'ān in the Muslim Academy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 71–73.

105 This is a compilation of pre-Islamic poetry gathered by Abū Tamām (ca. 942) and a critical reading of the Tabrizi version. See Anon, 'Dr Freytag's Edition of the *Hamasa*', *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellani* (Calcutta: June, 1827), 800–805.

both Muslims and Christians alike were positive. A letter from Maulānā Faṣīḥ, for example, noted that a group of Muslims met weekly for the sole purpose of discussing Sayyid Ahmad's writings on the *injīl*:

> Thanks be to God – countless thanks – that there is a man in this generation that gives prudent guidance. Your *tafsīr* is read here every Tuesday. And its worthy praise is evoked in reading each sentence, and thankfulness to God for you flows from our hearts.[106]

Among Christians, Reverend Rajab ʻAlī, editor of the Urdu Christian periodical *Nūr Afshān*, recounted the response of T.J. Scott, Principal of Bareilly Divinity School. Scott wrote, 'Oh that all nations of the world, particularly the Muslim peoples (*ahl-i Islām*), could attain the opinions (*rāʾi*) of Maulvi Sayyid Ahmad Khan Bahadur'.[107]

The responses changed dramatically, however, following the 1883 publication of *Tabyīn* Parts 1 and 2 (which appeared without Part 3). The response from Christians, most of whom were reading *Tabyīn* for the first time, was very negative and some sternly repudiated the work. Rajab ʻAlī explained that this was because the reprint was read in light of Sayyid Ahmad's subsequent works, most specifically the *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*: 'These [writings on the Bible in *Tafsīr*] inflicted incomparably greater damage than the combined voluminous attacks of Raḥmat Allāh [Kairānawī] and Hādī ʻAlī', two of the foremost anti-Christian polemicists'.[108] This opposition was not because Sayyid Ahmad attacked the Biblical text, which he clearly did not. Rather, the 'damage' was created by his deconstruction of the supernatural accounts including Jesus's birth, miraculous healings and death on the cross.[109] All miracles were discounted, and explained away through metaphorical interpretations, and this was seen as violence to the text. The shift in the audience's response draws attention to the rationalist progression of Sayyid Ahmad's thinking. Though his theology had

106 Ḥālī, *Hayat-i Javed*, 171. Muḥammad Ismāʻīl Pānīpatī, *Khutūt be-nām Sir Sayyid* (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqi Adab, 1995). Dar, *Religious Thought*, 9. Bashir Dar also noted the positive response from Muslim readers.

107 Padrī Rajab ʻAlī, '*Al-mursalāt*', *Nūr Afshān*, 4 October 1883, 315. This is a Christian Urdu vernacular gazette published from 1873 to 1944 from Jalandhar and then Lahore. It was unearthed at Forman Christian College, Lahore, during this study and is now available digitally through the British Library's Endangered Archives Program.

108 Padrī Rajab ʻAlī, '*Bible qānūn qudarat ke mutābiq hī*', *Nūr Afshān*, 6 April 1882, 108.

109 'Broad Church Mohamedanism' was also considered a threat by the missionaries, and addressed extensively by ʻImād al-Dīn Lāhiz in four pamphlets entitled *Tanqīd al-khayalāt* (Rectification of Men's thoughts) (Amritsar: Mission Press, 1882). For greater detail on the Christian response, see Augustus Brodhead, *Conference on Urdu and Hindi Literature, Held at Allahabad* (Madras: The Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1875).

not fully crystalized in the 1860s when he was working on *Tabyīn*, by 1883 his ideas had hardened into a naturalist rationalism that denied the very possibility of supernatural intervention within the created world.

After the *Tabyīn* project was discontinued in 1865, Sayyid Ahmad published another important work for Muslim-Christian relations in 1868, *Aḥkām-i ṭaʿām ahl-i kitāb* (Principles for Eating with the People of the Book). He reminded the reader that, according to the Qur'an, there is love due to one's own community, but there is also love that is due to all humanity. 'Selfless love', he wrote, 'accounts for the early spread of Islam and this ethic is necessary to mend strained communal relations'.[110] Drawing from the legal opinions by Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (d. 1824), Sayyid Ahmad argued that Jewish and Christian legislative doctrines (*sharʿīa*) remain active and are transferable.[111] Therefore, it was permissible for Muslims to share table fellowship with Christians and Jews, and even to eat meat prepared according to their respective dietary customs. This attitude can clearly be seen in Sayyid Ahmad's account of his journey to Europe in *Musāfirān-i London*, a travelogue written on his voyage to England that same year to accompany his son, Sayyid Mahmūd, India's first study grant beneficiary.

5.2.2 Period of Consolidation

The writings following our author's return from England mark the consolidation of his thought. The 'conversion' to science begun in 1844 now crystalized into a rationalist conviction that became fully apparent in the publication of *Tafsīr*. But let us trace the progression in the works produced in this latter phase of his career.

During his travels in Britain, Sayyid Ahmad was heavily engaged in composing *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*.[112] This was a response to *The Life of Mahomet from Original Sources*, a work by William Muir who is mentioned above.[113] Published in English from

110 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Aḥkām-i ṭaʿām Ahl-i Kitāb* (*1868*) (Aligarh: Aligarh University Press, 2011), 48–73.

111 This work was published originally by Nawal Kishore in Lucknow. Kishore, though not a Muslim, contributed generously to Sayyid Ahmad's Aligarh college as well as to the fledgling madrasa at Deoband.

112 Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London: Trübner & Co., 1870).

113 William Muir, *Life of Mahomet from Original Sources*, 4 vols. (London: 1858–1861); Avril A. Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 197–199.

London in 1870, this was a shot across the bows for public consumption. It was at once a condemnation of Muir's prejudiced perspective and a commendation of the character of Muḥammad. Sayyid Ahmad supported his view by citing British thinkers who expressed positive views about Muḥammad and the Qur'an, and who attributed progressive ideas to earlier Muslim civilizations. As Gulfishan Khan keenly observed, what Sayyid Ahmad refrained from saying was actually of far greater interest.[114] The rebuttal contained very few actual references to Muir's work. Rather than restate Muir's rather base opinions, which would only have added insult to injury, Sayyid Ahmad presented the Prophet, in language reminiscent of that of Thomas Carlyle or Godfrey Higgins, as a great man, hero and philosopher.[115] This work was later expanded into a much larger study on the life of Muḥammad and published eighteen years later in Urdu as *Al-khuṭubāt al-Aḥmadiyyah fī al-ʿArab wa-l-sīra al-Muḥammadiyyah*. This work in itself marks the author's on-going preparation for composing *Tafsīr*, a commentary on the Qur'an. In short, though clearly offended by Muir's approach, Sayyid Ahmad's rejoinder in *A Series of Essays* was a measured response addressing the broadest possible Anglophone audience.

A Series of Essays included an important marker that has been previously overlooked: the *nabvī* calendar. Sayyid Ahmad added a new way of measuring time to the title page and this dating system appears on all his subsequent writings. Typical of his style, Sayyid Ahmad simply added this to the banner of the book without any explanation, *fait accompli*. This overlooked eccentricity is one of many signposts provided by the author to subtly inform the attentive reader. In one perspective, it appears to indicate a shift, a consolidation in Sayyid Ahmad's thinking.

Sayyid Ahmad's *nabvī* calendar commences with the first occasion of Qur'anic revelation, 22 December 609 CE. Juxtaposed with the traditional *hijrī* dating, which started with the Muslim community's exodus from Mecca to Medina, the *nabvī* marks the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic career. A *nabvī* dating emphasizes the inherent unity of the Qur'an by reducing the emphasis placed by interpreters upon the later revelations, often understood to correct or even abrogate earlier ones. In addition, the exodus to Medina marks the community's shift from a broader monotheistic affinity with other communities such as Christians and Jews towards greater differentiation and

114 Gulfishan Khan, 'A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (*Sira*) of the Prophet Muhammad'. In S. Iraqi, ed., *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Vision and Mission* (Delhi: Manohar, 2008), 108.

115 Clinton Bennett, *In Search of Muhammad* (London: Cassell, 1998), 100–105.

competition.[116] The former is characterized by greater monotheistic solidarity, the latter by increased covenantal particularity.[117]

The addition of the *nabvī* calendar coincided with Sayyid Ahmad's increased resolve to bring about broad-scale socio-religious reforms, as most clearly seen in *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* (The Mohammedan Social Reformer). This was launched on 25 December 1870, on the auspicious occasion when Christmas and *Eid-ul-Fitr* occurred on the same day. The opening article 'Prejudice' (*taʿaṣṣub*), which is still included in the Indian school syllabus, reflects an editorial agenda that was sustained for nearly thirty years. 'Due to misplaced zeal', Sayyid Ahmad wrote, 'we Muslims have wrongly considered prejudice to be a virtue. But of humanity's meanest traits, prejudice is the worst … Prejudice forbids listening, understanding, and the careful consideration of differing opinions'.[118] There was a clear objective: to advocate that, in fidelity to Islam, Muslims must regard people of other faiths as 'our brothers and it is obligatory for us to love them, care for them, and to develop friendship with them'.[119] As will be seen in the chapters ahead, such statements were not intended merely for appeasement or political rapprochement, but rather they proceed from a theology of history made possible by Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of revelation.

5.2.3 Composition of *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*

Sayyid Ahmad's progress as a writer culminated in *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (*Tafsīr al-Qur'ān wa hova al-hūda w'al-furqān*). The extensive project appeared in seven volumes published between 1880 and 1904. Work on *Tafsīr* commenced in 1877 and was presented in instalments collated in *Taṣānīf-i Aḥmadiyyah*, a multi-volume *oeuvre* that aggregated Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings chronologically. Sayyid Ahmad provided the reason for this:

> I wrote various religious books, each of which corresponds to my ideas at a certain period [of my life]. To collect and arrange [chronologically] all of them, therefore, means to present, as it were, the ideas of all these periods in their [chronological] order. This may well be of use to myself

116 David Marshall, *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 184–185.

117 Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Bellknap, 2010), 1–15. Donner explains that social, economic and political norms were not yet crystalized. The emphasis was not upon the singularity or finality of Muḥammad's status as prophet, but rather upon the broader adherence to monotheistic belief.

118 TA 1 (December 1870), 2.

119 Ibid.

> and to future generations. Therefore, I present all my religious books and tracts together in this part of my [collected] writings.[120]

In *Tasānīf*, Sayyid Ahmad presented his religious writings within a continuum. The hope was that future generations would trace the progression of his ideas and carry them forward in the same line.

There is yet to be a definitive study of *Tafsīr*, and this remains a sizeable gap in the literature. Daud Rahbar has provided a great service in translating Sayyid Ahmad's list of hermeneutical principles, but he stopped short of commenting upon their significance. He identifies, however, the importance of coherence (*naẓm*) in Sayyid Ahmad's exegetical approach, which had not been previously noted.[121] To place this in context, there has been agreement amongst Muslim scholars regarding the Qurʾan's miraculous nature (*iʿjāz*), but disagreement as to what this entailed. Some, such as Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) and Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), amongst many other possible examples, explained that it referred to its inimitable eloquence (*fasāḥa*). This is the view that the Qurʾan evidences both a surpassing aesthetic beauty and an essential profundity that testify to its nature as revelation. This is the view expressed in Raḥmat Allāh's polemical text *Iʿjāz ʿĪsawī*, for example, published after the Agra debates in 1854 with Carl Pfander. Unlike the Bible, he argued, the Qurʾan's miraculous inimitability guarantees its authority and testifies to the prophethood of Muḥammad. Sayyid Ahmad, however, holds to a different view.

Other Muslim exegetes explained the miracle of the Qurʾan through the idea of coherence (*naẓm*).[122] This view was attributed to Ibn Zubayr (d. 692) and was subsequently expanded by scholars such as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), who features strongly in the writings of Shāh Walī Allāh and Sayyid Ahmad.[123] These hold that the miracle of the Qurʾan is displayed in the arrangement and order of the interwoven text (*matn*). Though portions were revealed 'piecemeal' (to use Daud Rahbar's term) and in response to particular historical events, these were layered into a cohesive thematic and structural whole. The

120 Christian Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978), xvii. These works were subsequently printed in *Taṣānīf-i Aḥmadiyyah*, vols 1–6 (Aligarh Insitute Press between 1880–1895), vol. 7 (Agra: Mufīd-i ʿĀmm, 1904), vol. 1, Part 1.

121 Rahbar, 'Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's Principles of Exegesis', 324–325.

122 Muhammad Abdullah, 'Trends of Nazm al Qurān in Tafsīr Literature in the Sub-Continent', *Al-Adwa* 37 (2012): 55–65; Mustansir Mir, 'Unity of the Text of the Qurʾān', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill Online, 2013).

123 Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qurʾanic Exegesis: Genesis and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 82.

miraculous genius of the Qur'an is seen in the manner individual threads – revealed over a course of twenty-three years – became interlaced into a total that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

For this camp, knowledge embedded in the Qur'an's form was vital for elucidating meaning. As Michael Sells has written, the Qur'an testifies to its distinction above other genres, such as poetry and the words of soothsayers, precisely because of the applicable comprehensibility of its message. 'Poets speak out of desire and do not understand what they are saying, while a prophet speaks what is revealed to him by God (Q 26)'.[124] Proponents of *naẓm*, who were heavily represented among the Muʿtazilīs, believed that the Prophet understood what he heard and recited, as did the original Arab audience.[125]

Sayyid Ahmad's approach sought to identify information present in the text of the Qur'an. In principle thirteen of *Taḥrīr*, a list of hermeneutical principles, he wrote:

> The Holy Qur'an's own context and tenor (*sabāk wa siyāk*), and its own style and structure (*aslūb wa naẓm*), provide the surest means for ascertaining information concerning the occasions of revelation (*shān-i nuzūl*). And only from what is located and mentioned in the Qur'an can [interpretative] principles be elucidated.[126]

As his student Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāḥī (d. 1930) later explained, 'the argument from *faṣāḥat*, or miraculous eloquence, rendered the Qur'an as a piecemeal aggregation whose form has no semblance or reason or order. Yet, if the Qur'an is allowed to ultimately interpret itself (*al-furqān fī 'l-furqān*), then the pieces fit together perfectly'.[127] He was exploring the Qur'an in light of information contained within its own pages, and of that recorded in the Bible.

It is important to recognize that Sayyid Ahmad was cognizant of developments in European Qur'anic scholarship during the composition of *Tabyīn* and throughout his subsequent writings. He was the first Indian scholar to enumerate verses (*ayāt*) in the Qur'an, as seen in the *Tabyīn* and *Tafsīr*. Though Sayyid

124 Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelations* (Ashland: White Cloud Press, 2007), 7.

125 Sabine Schmidtke, 'Muʿtazila', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill Online, 2013).

126 Muḥammad Rāzī al-Islām Nadvī, 'Sir Sayyid aur ʿulūm Islāmiyya', in Muḥammad Yasīn Mazhar Ṣiddīqi, ed., *Sir Sayyid kī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān aur mābād tafsīr par uskī asrāt* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, 2001), 63–84.

127 Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāḥī, *Majmūʿa Tāfāsīr-i Farāhī*, trans. Amīn Aḥsān Iṣlāḥī (Lahore: Farān Fousndation, 2008), 35.

Ahmad offered no comment on this decision, Chirāgh ʿAlī explained that this convention was added to facilitate correlation with the works of Europeans such as Gustav Flügel (d. 1870) and John Rodwell (d. 1900).[128] Sayyid Ahmad followed Flügel's enumeration. Flügel's 1834 *textus receptus* drew from multiple manuscripts, primarily a North African source (*Leithandschrift*) though also some of what is now known as the standard Egyptian tradition. Sayyid Ahmad's use of these indicates a degree of familiarity with this textual criticism. Reference to Rodwell again draws attention to the subject of textual coherence (*naẓm*). Rodwell sought to reconstruct the Qurʾan chronologically by rearranging the *ayāt* according to their occasions of revelation. Space prohibits a juxtaposition of Sayyid Ahmad's work with these, but that could be a valuable study. It is sufficient to note here that, even in the absence of citations, it can be inferred that Sayyid Ahmad was familiar with developments underway in the Western study of the Qurʾan.

Sayyid Ahmad faced strong opposition for the religious views expressed in his *Tafsīr*, but his influence was nevertheless extensive in the first half of the twentieth century.[129] As Bashir Dar wrote in 1957: 'People claiming to belong to different sectarian groups and viewpoints still go back to this masterpiece for inspiration, light, and guidance … His commentary on the Qurʾān was followed by almost all those who entered the field after him'.[130] Much has changed since Dar's time, and this is no longer the case today. The embattled Ahl-i Qurʾān are largely perceived as heirs to Sayyid Ahmad's interpretative paradigm because of their rejection of Hadith as an authoritative source.[131] However, as will be considered in Chapter 5, the Iṣlāhī movement carries forward some elements of Sayyid Ahmad's framework more than any other, particularly in the use of *naẓm* and in the affirmative use of the Bible as a source for Qurʾanic interpretation.

6 Conclusion

India's Muslims experienced profound loss in the nineteenth-century, particularly in the period following the 1857 uprising. Sayyid Ahmad emerged as a

128 Chiragh Ali, *A Critical Exposition of Popular Jihad* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1885), 120.

129 Abdurraḥman Kīlānī, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, vol. 1 (Lahore: Darussalaam, 2010), 6–9. For example, the introduction to this recent commentary dedicates three pages to refuting Sayyid Ahmad.

130 Dar, *Religious Thought*, vi.

131 Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority*, 54.

dynamic leader in a time of great need. As Shamsur Faruqi's recounted, he was 'a saviour, a sage, and a political-social leader of tremendous credibility … [who] thus gave a feeling of self-confidence which had been lost apparently forever'.[132] Opposition to his religious ideas, however, has been equally lasting. As Bruce Lawrence reflects, of India's nineteenth-century thinkers 'none was more renowned or more reviled than Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan'.[133] This divided legacy persists. Although his poster adorns avenues in many neighbourhoods, many *ulamā'* still scurrilously deride him as an atheist and heretic.[134] As will be carefully discussed is Chapter 5, the reason for such disdain is ultimately derived from Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation, and his approach to elucidating the word.

132 Faruqi, *From Antiquary to Social Revolutionary*, 3.

133 Lawrence, *The Qur'ān*, 144.

134 Pervez Hoodbhoy, 'Why Sir Sayyid Loses and Allama Iqbal Wins in Pakistan', *The Express Tribune*, 9 February 2013.

CHAPTER 3

On the Bible

Sayyid Ahmad's acceptance of the present Bible – the Christian Old and New Testaments – is incontrovertible.[1] This was demonstrably stated and explained in *Tabyīn*, and again reaffirmed much later in *Tafsīr* (1877). Indeed, it was pre-emptively articulated in the exposition of the very first words of his exposition of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*:

> The manuscripts available in the world today of the Torah, Books of Prophecy, and Gospels (*Tawrāt, Ṣaḥāif ul-anbiyā, aur Injīl*), are considerably different (*nihāyat mukhtalif*) but I do not accept that the Jews and Christians corrupted (*taḥrīf-i lafẓī*) their scriptures, and neither do our informed ancient scholars (*'ūlamā'-i mutaqaddimīn va muḥaqqiqīn*). Only recent scholars are convinced that these have been corrupted and changed (*taḥrīf o tabdīl kī hain*).[2]

This may appear innovative at first glance, but there was ample precedent for commentators who made reference to the Bible as a source of religious knowledge. Shāh Walī Allāh, for example, listed the scriptures of the Jews and Christians as an interpretative source along with the Hadith, and *ijtīhād*.[3] Sayyid Ahmad revered these texts, but how did he read them?

In the previous chapter we observed that a close reading of the Bible was part of our author's development as a religious thinker. In this chapter, we shall explore the manner in which Sayyid Ahmad read these earlier scriptures in the light of the Qur'an. 'The guidance and light brought by that Prophet [Muḥammad]', as Sayyid Ahmad explained, 'is stated in this commentary (*tafsīr*) on the divine word (*kalām ilāhi*) that comprises the Old Testament (*ahad-i 'atīq*) and New Testament (*ahad-i jadīd*)'.[4] Sayyid Ahmad attributed

1 By 'acceptance of the present Bible', we mean that Sayyid Ahmad recognized that the English word 'Bible', from the Greek *ta Biblia*, which means 'The Books', refers to a collection of many individual works. There are 27 books in the New Testament, and in the Old Testament, either 39 in Protestant and Jewish editions, or 46 in Catholic editions that contain the Pseudo-Canonical writings form the inter-testamental period. For a cogent summary see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

2 TQ, 1: 4.

3 Ḥarīrī, *Taḥrīk tafsīr*, 42.

4 TK, 3: 15.

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parity to all revelation and coherence to God's word recorded in the Qur'an and the Bible. The key to this rationale, as we shall see, is found in the different modes he applied to characterize prophetic revelation. Let us now consider *Tabyīn al-kalām* in greater detail.

1 What Is the Significance of the Title *Tabyīn al-kalām*?

The title includes a number of terms that seem to be have been deliberately chosen. The word *kalām*, for example, is open to multiple readings. Considering that Part 1 is structured as contiguous discourses, and if one recounts Sayyid Ahmad's appreciation for scholastic theology and the works of the *Ahl al-kalām*, 'argument' might be a plausible translation. In Part 3, however, our author specifically deplores argumentation and the 'darkness of proofs' to 'silence the opponent'.[5] Fortunately, he provides a translation of the term to clarify that the meaning of *kalām* that he intends is 'word' (or '*wurd*' as he transliterates it in the Urdu text), which he clarifies as synonymous with *lafẓ* and *kalima*.[6] This explanation is provided in the exposition of Christ's words: 'by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

The word *tabyīn* is from the Arabic root *b-y-n* meaning to make manifest, affirm, or elucidate.[7] Its use here appears to be symbolic, as it alludes to the author's role as a *mujtahid*, or one prepared to provide clear meaning. The term may echo an affinity with the Mu'tazilī theologian al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868). If so, Sayyid Ahmad is not alone in perceiving this rationalist as a forerunner of modern science. Ebrahim Moosa, for example, has described al-Jāḥiẓ as 'progressive' and a 'proto-scientist' who reflected the genius of Islamic civilization.[8] Sayyid Ahmad employed several key terms that are associated with al-Jāḥiẓ, foremost among them being referred to *ḥayawān* (as in al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-ḥayawān*), which Sayyid Ahmad applied to describe the manifold elements of natural science. As noted in the previous chapter, Sayyid Ahmad also adopted the title

5 TK, 3: 99.

6 Ibid., 84–85.

7 For greater detail see John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: Crosby, Lockwood, and Son, 1911); S.M. Salimuddin, ed., *Oxford Urdu-English Dictionary* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8 Ebrahim Moosa, 'The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam', in Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), 111–114. This was also the attitude of Muhammad Shafi (1883–1963), for example, who instructed Pakistani luminaries such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Fazlur Rahman, and Daud Rahbar. S.M. Abdullah, ed., *Professor Muhammad Shafi Presentation Volume* (Lahore: Majlis-e-Armughān-e-'Ilmi, 1955).

Tahdhīb al-akhlāq (refinement of morals) for his journal. It is possible that the title *Tabyīn al-kalām* was inspired to some degree by al-Jāḥiẓ's *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*.[9]

One similarity shared between *Tabyīn al-kalām* and *Al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn* is that these are works of *ādāb*. *Ādāb* (sing. *adab*) is a courtly term used to refer to moral instruction, ethics and conduct, but it also has a fuller meaning. As Gabriel Said Reynolds explains: '*Ādāb* are the fundamental directing principles of the outer life of a Sufi, parallel to the inner stages and states (*maqāmāt* and *aḥwāl*) of the mystical path'.[10] In the Sufi worldview characteristic of this region, the term was directly associated with the notion of spiritual progression, the movement towards *tawḥīd-i wujūdī*, or union with the divine unity.[11] *Ādāb* referred to the training – the manners and comportment – that enabled one to ascend the *via mystica*. As Sayyid Ahmad explains, 'moral conduct and virtuous behaviour are insufficient without an interiorized (*bāṭinī*) ethic of the heart'.[12] Moral action, the kind that is necessary for right living and peaceful coexistence, must proceed from internal transformation. For the Naqshbandī Sufis in Sayyid Ahmad's environment, *ādāb* spoke to one's place in the world through the metaphor of being a guest at God's divine banquet. In this light, our author's approach to the Bible is that of a fellow guest at God's table. In the language of *ādāb*, conduct is the external (*zāḥirī*) demonstration of an internal (*bāṭinī*) attitude.[13] This explanation is consistent with the pronounced Sufi tone of the earliest writings found in Part 3, where the title *Tabyīn* was first applied. Here, in his attitude towards the Bible and the 'People of the Book', Sayyid Ahmad demonstrates *ādāb* by avoiding polemic and advocating inter-communal conviviality.

The remainder of the title explains the task to be done: *fī tafsīr al-Tawrāt wa-l-Injīl ʿala millat al-Islām*. Sayyid Ahmad sets out to shed light on the 'word' through exegetical commentary (*tafsīr*). His application of the term *tafsīr* – historically the most 'Islamic' of literatures – to the study of the Bible was itself a disclosure of reverence. *Tafsīr* is a term usually used only in reference to commentary on the Qur'an and is taken from Q 25:33. Muslims have refrained from

9 Sayyid Ahmad uses the same uncommon spelling in his title as that written in al-Jāḥiẓ's text found in the Aligarh library. That is, he writes '*tab'īn*', with *hamza*, rather than the common spelling '*tabyīn*', with *yā'*.

10 Gabriel Said Reynolds, 'The Sufi Approach to Food: A Case Study of Ādāb', *The Muslim World* 20 (2000): 199.

11 Fazlur Rahman, ed. *Intikhāb-i maktūbāt-i Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī* (Karachi: Iqbāl Akādamī, 1968), 44.

12 TK, 3: 112. For a description in a related context see Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, 80–82.

13 Pellat, *Life and Works of Jahiz*, 329–331.

applying the term *tafsīr* to texts other than the Qur'an because it inherently conveys a sense of authority. Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, for example, in his extensive 'commentary' on the Bible, does not refer to his work as *tafsīr*, but rather as *taʿlīq*, meaning an attachment in the sense of additional comment.[14] Arab Jews and Christians, on the other hand, readily use the word *tafsīr* in reference to Biblical commentary.[15] Jewish Rabbi Saʿadia Gaon (d. 942), for example, who is referenced on three occasions in *Tabyīn*, specifically applied *tafsīr* to his commentary on the Torah to emphasize this very point.[16] In this light, Sayyid Ahmad's use of *tafsīr* indicates his reverence for the texts he is expounding.

2 How Did Sayyid Ahmad Present His Commentaries on the Bible?

The earliest extant writing from the *Tabyīn* series is the 1862 edition of *Part 1: Initial Discourses* (*Hādh muqaddimāt*). The earliest version of *Part 2: The Book of Genesis* (*Kitāb paidāish*) is from 1865, though an extant title page dated 1863 indicates that there was an earlier publication. The earliest copy of *Part 3: The Holy Gospel of Matthew from the Opening Chapter to Chapter 5* (*Injīl-i muqaddas Mattī az bāb-i awwal tā bāb-i panjam*) is that republished by the author in 1887 in his multi-volume oeuvre of religious writings, *Taṣānīf-i Aḥmadiyyah*.

It has been previously assumed that the three parts were completed between 1862 and 1865 in Ghazipur and in the order assigned by the author, but a close reading convincingly establishes that *Part 3* (*The Holy Gospel*) was completed first. Once this is known, it is not difficult to clarify the documentary evidence that might otherwise have seemed inconclusive. In a letter to John Muehleisen Arnold, reproduced in *Taṣānīf* (1883), for example, Sayyid Ahmad confirmed that his first writings on the '*Injīl*' were already 'printed in 1862', and that writings from Genesis would follow thereafter.[17] On another occasion, as recounted in the biography by Ḥālī, Sayyid Ahmad wrote:

> After the first part of my *tafsīr* is printed, Muslims will understand that what is written in favour of the *Injīl* is based on the noble Qur'ān and other authentic books. Many have praised me, and have believed upon it and respected it, and share my thoughts.[18]

14 Lejla Demiri, *Muslim Exegesis of the Bible in Medieval Cairo: Najm Al-Dīn Al-Ṭūfī's (D. 716/1316) Al-Taʿlīq* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3–28.

15 Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 240.

16 Steiner, *Biblical Translation*, 94–96, 100–101.

17 TFA, 2, part 1:131.

18 Ḥālī, *Hayāt-i Javed*, 119.

This statement is further supported by letters such as one by Maulana Muḥammad Faṣiḥ, who wrote in 1861: 'I have read your *tafsīr*, and I openly agree that without doubt it is an (*be-misl*) incomparable work that commends the *Inǰīl* and confirms the religion of Islam'.[19] The corrected arrangement of the texts proves to be of considerable importance for elucidating the development of Sayyid Ahmad's ideas, particularly with regard to the crystallisation of his naturalist position.

Sayyid Ahmad's approach to writing is characterized by an editorial intentionality. His terminology differentiates between parts (*ḥissa*), which are movable, and volumes (*jild*), into which these were subsequently gathered. Despite the inverted order of composition, we shall consider the writings here according to the order in which they are presented by the author. Part 1 is an orderly presentation of Sayyid Ahmad's thoughts on the Bible. It has a structured rationale that defines key theological concepts. The ten discourses serve as a prolegomenon to the inter-textual commentary demonstrated in the studies of Genesis and Matthew. Part 1 prepared the way for Parts 2 and 3. However, before composing Part 1, Sayyid Ahmad had already published Part 3, which expresses personal convictions that undergird and clarify his attitude towards the Bible. Seen in this light, with the foreknowledge of Part 3, Part 1 can be read as an attempt to rationalize the author's foregone conclusions by which he aims to remove roadblocks that might hinder the Muslim reader from theological engagement with the Bible. The most pressing are doubts regarding the Bible's textual history, namely the corruption (*taḥrīf*) of the text, and its place in Muslim faith, or the abrogation (*al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*) of its guidance. The first concerns the authenticity of the biblical message, and the second its authority.

3 Rationale for a Muslim Reading of the Bible

Part 1 is a prolegomenon to the critical commentary. It is a set of ten preliminary discourses that present the author's rationale for the project. The discourses are as follow: 1. Prophets are sent to save (*najāt*) mankind;[20] 2. What is Revelation (*waḥy*) and [what is] divine word (*kalām ilāhi*)?; 3. Which are the books alluded to in the Qur'an under the names *Tawrāt*, *Ṣaḥūf-i anbiyā'*, *Zabūr*, and *Inǰīl*?; 4. What faith have Muslims in the *Tawrāt*, *Ṣaḥūf-i anbiyā'*, *Zabūr*, and *Inǰīl*?; 5. How many books descended from God to prophets, and are they all

19 Ibid.

20 This is the only discourse that is not presented in English. For a translation see Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 236–242.

included in the Bible?; 6. What are the methods applied by the Muslim religion to enquire into, and confirm the authenticity of a religious book?; 7. What is the opinion of Muslims regarding the corruption of the sacred scriptures?; 8. Are the books that compose the Bible identical with the original writings of the inspired authors?; 9. What belief have Muslims regarding the versions of these books?; 10. What is meant, according to the Muslim faith, by one commandment of God cancelling another, or being cancelled by another? Two appendices are provided that chart Biblical events in Gregorian and minus-Hijri dates.

The primary concern in Part 1 is to justify a Muslim reading of the Bible. Although the initial instalments of the Gospel of Matthew were warmly received by the Urdu reading public, as noted in the previous chapter, the idea of a Muslim reading of the Bible was still a novel idea, and one that required explanation. There were ample detractors among both communities who were suspicious of the intentions behind such a venture. It could be that the recognition of this concern caused Sayyid Ahmad to halt the work on the Gospel of Matthew at the end of Chapter 5, and shift his energy towards a carefully reasoned rationale for the larger project.

The ten discourses that comprise Part 1 address two primary obstacles that have historically hindered a serious Muslim reading of the Bible. The first is the view that the Biblical text has been corrupted (*taḥrīf*), as provocatively popularized by the polemicist Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī. The second is the notion that the Biblical revelation has been surpassed, or abrogated (*al-nāsikh wa-l-mansūkh*) – and therefore is no longer binding or efficacious – by the revelation granted to Muḥammad. Before fellow Muslims could join in the study of the Bible with a 'pure heart' (*nekh dillī se*), these historic concerns required reasoned consideration.[21]

4 *Taḥrīf*: The Greatest Obstacle to the *Tabyīn* Project

The discourse structure in Part 1 recognizes the subject of textual reliability as a crucial issue for Muslim – Christian encounter. Christian reverence for the Qur'an is of central importance to Sayyid Ahmad, and he repeatedly addressed this in his writings. The emphasis in Discourses 5–7, however, is placed squarely upon denying the textual corruption (*inḥirāf*) of the Bible. This is not a simple matter. 'Despite accusations of alteration and corruption', as Abdurraḥman Kilānī has explained, 'the Qur'an has never denigrated (*kabhi badẓan nahin*

21 TK, 2: 348.

kiā) the Bible, but rather it instructs us to think highly of it'.[22] Though several passages in the Qur'an allude to forms of malfeasance, overt commendation of the Bible cannot be denied. This creates a problem for thinkers such as Kilānī, namely why would a perfect Qur'an affirm an imperfect, or corrupted Bible? This caused a conundrum for some readers. Part 1 is about disarming such allegations and opening a path for textual engagement.

Resolution of this predicament is central to the discourse structure. The progression is chiastic. Discourses 1–4 emphasize the common ground shared by monotheists who ascribe to prophetic revelation. The Creator endowed humans with knowledge, but prophecy has provided what could not otherwise be known. This reaches a climax in Discourses 5–7, in which the author claims to have resolved the issue of *taḥrīf*. He then doubles back to reinforce the premise set out in 1–4, namely that all revelation is granted to establish the worship of the One God. Encyclopaedic lists and critical opinions are presented throughout to affirm the author's status as an informed thinker, but the foundational argument maintained throughout is that the Qur'an affirms the textual reliability of the Bible. The Bible is sound because the Qur'an says so.

But to convince his Muslim readership, Sayyid Ahmad would need to effectively disarm the charges of *taḥrīf*. The charge of corruption has served as a particularly useful trope for silencing debate and delegitimizing opponents, whether Jews or Christians, or even competing Muslim schools of thought.[23] As noted in the previous chapter, access to European works of historical criticism added fuel to the fire and seemingly confirmed this longstanding accusation. Sayyid Ahmad was keenly aware that, if his argument were rejected, Muslim ties to the Bible, however tenuous they may have been, would be even further loosened in the aftermath of British (Christian) rule. If his argument were accepted, however, *Tabyīn* could become the manifesto for a new era of inter-textual exploration. The exercise could strengthen links between the communities and open avenues for increased collaboration.

In this light, it can be seen that Discourse 7 is the climax of Part 1. Here, Sayyid Ahmad makes one singular point: the meaning of *taḥrīf* in the Qur'an does not signify textual alteration. The Qur'an, he argues, does not portray the Biblical text as corrupted. The irony should not be missed. In this discourse, which is

22 Abdurraḥman Kilānī, *Dafā'-i Ḥadīth* (Lahore: Dar al-Undalis, 1999), 38.

23 Gordon Nickel, *Narratives of Tampering in the Earliest Commentaries on the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2; David S. Powers, 'Reading/Misreading One Another's Scriptures: Ibn Ḥazm's Refutation of Ibn Nagrella Al-Yahūdī', in William M. Brinner and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986), 109; John Wansbrough, *The Sacred Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford Universtiy Press, 1978), 41.

by far the most annotated and carefully structured in the series, Sayyid Ahmad mounts a defence of the Bible from Muslim sources. While specific issues with the text of the Bible are subsequently discussed in Discourses 8 and 9, and fuller answers are promised to follow in the commentary, the key argument in this central discourse is that the Qur'an cannot be understood as legitimizing the exclusion of Biblical testimony from Muslim religious thought. The list of examples so meticulously compiled by Kairānawī and Wazir Khan for the Agra debate, is here counteracted not by alternative Christian writings, but rather by the most quintessential of Islamic literatures: Qur'anic *tafsīr*.[24] By presenting the opinions of a distinguished cast of *mufassirīn*, including al-Suyūṭī, al-Ṭabarī, al-ʿAsqalānī, al-Rāzī, and Shāh Walī Allāh, Sayyid Ahmad argues that mainstream traditional Muslim exegesis does not regard the Biblical text as corrupt.[25]

4.1 *Taḥrīf Defined*

Defining *taḥrīf* is of crucial importance for Sayyid Ahmad's presentation. In Discourse 7, he relies heavily upon the writings of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210) to introduce the development of scholarly opinion on this issue. According to al-Rāzī, he explains, the meaning of *taḥrīf* is 'to change, alter, or turn something aside from its truth'; and, according to Imam al-Bukhārī (d. 870), it also means to spoil or deface (*bighārna*).[26] Although the word '*taḥrīf*' is not found in the Qur'an, *inḥirāf* (root *ḥ-r-f*) cognates appear on four occasions (Q 2:79; 4:46; 5:13; and 5:41). There are eight other terms in the Qur'an concerned with alteration, but these are subsidiary because they are not used in direct connection with the scriptures of the Jews and Christians.

Following al-Rāzī's definition, Sayyid Ahmad explains the difference between tampering with a text's words (*lafẓ*) and its meaning (*maʿnā*). According to al-Rāzī and Shāh Walī Allāh, Qur'anic references to *taḥrīf* concern the latter, that is, altering the meaning.[27] Even Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Sayyid Ahmad explains, who was seldom regarded as a friend to Christianity, purportedly

24 Saleh observes that *tafsīr* has been a genre for forwarding new ideas, even ideas that are not exegetical, and Sayyid Ahmad appeals to these for support. Walid Saleh, 'A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqāʿi and His Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur'ān', *Speculum* 83 (2008): 629–654.

25 Michael L. Fitzgerald, 'The Manner of Revelation: The Commentary of al-Rāzī on Qur'ān 42,51–53', *Islamochristiana* 4 (1978): 115–125. See also Tariq Jaffer, 'Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (D. 606/1210): Philosopher and Theologian as Exegete'. PhD diss., Yale University, 2005; Yasin Ceylan, *Theology and Tafsir in the Major Works of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi* (Kuala Lampur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1996); Lane, *Traditional Muʿtazilite Qur'ān Commentary*, xxii.

26 TK, 1: 69–70.

27 Ibid., 70.

affirmed this distinction between text and meaning and stated that scholars were ambivalent because of the many arguments 'adduced in support of the latter opinion'.[28] In summary, Sayyid Ahmad's argument is that the tampering with the Bible that is referred to in the Qur'an meant the manner in which the written text was expressed, translated and interpreted, not how its words themselves had been altered.[29] Despite the ambivalence of some predecessors, Sayyid Ahmad argues that there was ample support from stalwart exegetes to affirm that the Biblical scriptures remain viable as 'Books of God'.[30]

Moving forward in Discourse 7, he applies al-Rāzī's paradigm to differentiate between changes to the text and changes of meaning. It is important to note here that Sayyid Ahmad structures his presentation in close parallel to that of Walī Allāh in *Al-fawz al-kabīr fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*, often repeating the same words and illustrative examples. Although his dependence upon these two exegetes is well documented, the degree to which Sayyid Ahmad echoes the exhortative tone that resonates strongly in *Al-fawz al-kabīr* has yet to be documented. At the heart of Walī Allāh's exposition on *taḥrīf* was a warning to Qur'an interpreters not to misrepresent one's own words as those of God.[31] He directly addressed each of the primary divisions within the community of faith, namely the jurists, philosophers, theologians, Sufis and astrologers, and the Christians and Jews. Walī Allāh reprimanded each for their respective faults, and for committing errors that were tantamount to '*taḥrīf al-maʿnā*', that is the tampering with the meaning of the divine message by conscripting it to adduce one's own purposes. It is vital to note that Shāh Walī Allāh's writing on this subject did not single out Christians or Jews. When he addressed them, as he did the others, the Delhi sage did not level accusations against their sacred texts, but rather against their dogmatic interpreters. All of these parties, he claimed, were guilty of distorting the central meaning of God's message, namely the worship of God the One, and therefore of splintering the community of faith by exalting their own particular doctrine. The spirit of Walī Allāh's exhortation reverberates in Sayyid Ahmad's presentation. When one considers the breadth of Walī Allāh's influence in this setting, it can be seen that the reference to his position would have been recognized as both significant and authoritative.

Sayyid Ahmad's presentation echoes that of Walī Allāh. Like his predecessor, Sayyid Ahmad creates topical categories of ways in which tampering might possibly have taken place and lists eight: 1. Adding words or phrases; 2. Striking

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid; TQ, 1:12, 13, 18.

30 Abdullah Saeed, 'The Charge of Distortion of Jewish and Christian Scriptures', *The Muslim World* 92 (2002): 434.

31 Walī Allāh, *Al-fawz al-kabir*, 27.

existing words or phrases; 3. Substituting words with other words that have different meanings; 4. Changing the vocalization of words when reading aloud so as to convey a different meaning to the listener; 5. Reading selected passages and omitting others; 6. Teaching something other than the holy word while claiming it to be God's word; 7. Adopting a meaning for an ambiguous or equivocal interpretation that does not suit the original intent; 8. Misinterpreting mysterious and allegorical passages. He proposes that all forms of tampering can be covered within these categories, and that this classification will facilitate a more precise evaluation. He then identifies examples from the Qurʾan and Hadith and assigns them to a category.

Although their approaches are basically the same, Sayyid Ahmad goes further than Walī Allāh by isolating intention as the critical factor. Sayyid Ahmad's definition of *taḥrīf* coalesced on the objective of the person accused of tampering, rather than on the action performed. He argues that tampering, as it is understood in the Qurʾan, can only be labelled *taḥrīf* if it is done deliberately and with malicious intent. This definition clarifies that even a mechanical change to the text, examples of which Sayyid Ahmad identifies in his description of the Biblical canon in Part 2, do not sufficiently qualify as *taḥrīf* unless the intention of the scribe was to subvert the meaning of the text. According to Sayyid Ahmad's definition, there are no examples of *taḥrīf* in the first three categories, which are about tampering with the Biblical text (*taḥrīf-i lafẓi*) itself, but the same cannot be said of the last five which pertain to the tampering with the meaning (*taḥrīf al-maʿnā*).

4.2 *Tampering with the Text*

Sayyid Ahmad's definition of *taḥrīf* covered a multitude of sins. Scribal errors, such as the omission or misspelling of words were exempt. Other changes, such as factual errors, insertions and divergent passage endings, for example, did not fulfil the requirements of the definition unless these were done out of perverse wilfulness. This understanding of textual history differs completely from that of someone like Raḥmat Allāh Kairānawī. In Kairānawī's usage, *taḥrīf* signified that a text was not pristine; it is not identical to the original. Examples from mainstream Christian 'lower criticism' would suffice to meet his criteria and confirm his argument. Examples taken from the 'higher criticism' of the the so called 'atheists' (*mulḥidīn*) were added to his list only for dramatic affect. But Sayyid Ahmad's use of the term is different.

Sayyid Ahmad disassociates the term *taḥrīf* from historical critical analysis. He was familiar with the canonical process – of the Qurʾan and Bible – and with the complex history of their manuscript traditions. His definition of *taḥrīf* presupposes the role of inspired 'sacred historians' who composed Biblical scripture, and also that of editors, scribes and printers who were entrusted with

passing down the present texts. Sayyid Ahmad's gloss on the term *taḥrīf* and his estimation of the Bible are not due to naivety, but rather were derived in full awareness of the process by which textual critical scholars had laboured to reconcile the Hebrew and Greek texts to the earliest extant versions. In Kairānawī's view, a tampered text was not fit to be a source of guidance, regardless of the circumstances or intentions of the actor. Sayyid Ahmad was aware of this rationale and of its shortcomings, and that such implications could also apply to the Qur'an.

The importance of form critical research was clearly on the rise. Nineteenth-century Christian scholars were becoming increasingly aware of the Bible's complex textual history. Indeed, many found comfort in the belief that the present texts had been reconciled with the earliest manuscripts. Some, such as Thomas Hartwell Horne (d. 1862), who was recognized as a mainstream scholar in this time, continued to ascribe plenary inspiration and inerrancy to the Bible.[32] Others, such as John Henry Newman (d. 1890), recognized the presence of inaccuracies in the Bible. Though Newman was profoundly troubled by the implications, he found comfort in the fact that collateral additions (*obiter dicta*) did not challenge any known doctrine or interfere with the central message.[33] Sayyid Ahmad's position is quite similar. There is no benefit in squabbling over jots and tittles, as he later noted, for all ancient texts have some discrepancies.[34] Implicit in this generous consideration of the Biblical text was also an awareness of the complexities surrounding the transposition of the Qur'an from oral to written form. In the main, for Sayyid Ahmad, references to *taḥrīf* that are found in the Qur'an do not apply to the present Bible because collateral additions, even deliberate ones, had not been made with malicious intent.

4.3 *Tampering with the Meaning*

Qur'anic references to *taḥrīf*, therefore, concerned efforts to alter, or to subvert meaning (*taḥrīf al-maʿnā*). Sayyid Ahmad assigns passages to the relevant categories and then proceeds to explain the reason for this designation. The examples include, for example, references to deliberate verbal mistranslation intended to obscure a correct meaning, as found in Q 3:72 (78) and 2:70 (75).[35] They also include proof texting, or the selective reading of some portions while omitting others, in order to conceal the diversity of possible interpretative

32 TK, 1: 97.

33 Henry Wansborough, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible: A Brief History of Biblical Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 146–157.

34 TK, 1: 143.

35 Sayyid Ahmad Khan applied the Flügel numbering system, as was described in the previous chapter. The corresponding numbers from the standard Egyptian text of the Qur'an have been added in (brackets) to facilitate correspondence.

conclusions, such as in Q 2:55–56 (58–59) and 5:16 (13). The purpose of this form of concealment, he argued, was to restrict the audience's knowledge to only that which favoured a particular position. A third category pertained to attempts made in order to cast doubt upon the veracity of Muḥammad's prophetic vocation as in Q 4:46, the explanation of which was supplemented with an account from Hadith of the attempt by Jews in Medina to conceal the penalty for adultery as it was written in the *Tawrāt*. The fourth category concerned references related to the use and abuse of scripture for material gain, as Sayyid Ahmad reads the passage pertaining to 'selling of the word of God' in Q 2:141 (146). The commonality in all of these was that meaning was concealed or distorted. These examples qualify as *taḥrīf* because they were done deliberately and with malicious intent. Sayyid Ahmad adhered to this definition throughout his many writings, as was later reiterated in *Taḥrīr*, an essay concerning principles of interpretation, and then again in *Tafsīr*.[36]

5 *Nāsikh wa-mansūkh*

The final discourse in Part 1 addresses the second major obstacle to a Muslim reading of the Bible, namely the issue of abrogation (*nāsikh wa-mansūkh*). Abrogation was another highly contentious hermeneutical device and refers to cases where one command or text is overruled by a later one. Some argued that this applied to verses (*āyat*) or even to entire suras that had been annulled by subsequent divine correction. There has been considerable disagreement concerning the extent to which this has occurred, but in the extreme, there are those who claim that approximately half of the Qur'an's 500 injunctions have been abrogated. Others hold to a more conservative view, like that of Shāh Walī Allāh, who ascribes to a position similar to that of the Muʿtazilīs, and claims that only 28 Qur'anic injunctions have been abrogated.[37] Sayyid Ahmad, however, rejects the doctrine of *naskh* (abrogation) altogether. Contrary to his learned predecessor, he asserts that not a single command was abrogated, but rather that these held true as intended.

This discourse provides a fitting conclusion to Part 1 because it addresses the Bible's continued relevance in Muslim faith. Closely intertwined with the doctrine of *taḥrīf*, *naskh* has been employed as a polemical device to undermine the relevance of earlier revelation. The notion of *naskh* most likely originated in the early rescinding of Jewish and Christian legal provisions within

36 Khān, 'Principles of Exegesis', 102; TQ, 1: 94–95.

37 Harīrī, *Taḥrīk tafsīr*, 166.

Islamic law.[38] Over time, however, this culminated in the annulment of not only specific items, but also to 'the entire salvatory value of the two [Jewish and Christian] dispensations'.[39] The progression from corruption to abrogation underscores the correlation between authenticity and authority. If the Biblical testimony were to be recognized as authentic, questions must follow regarding its ethical and salvific value in Muslim faith and practice. These are precisely the questions that Sayyid Ahmad promises to explore in his exegesis. The Qur'an was read in light of Sunna, but he would explore how a reverent inclusion of the Bible might adjust this balance.

In this final discourse of Part 1, Sayyid Ahmad issues a corrective definition for the concept of abrogation. Borrowing a metaphor that he had already developed in the exegesis of Matthew 5:17–20 in Part 3 ('Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil …'), Sayyid Ahmad describes the Almighty as a good doctor who prescribes a remedy for a specific period. Like a medical prescription, divine law is not rescinded but rather completed once its purpose is fulfilled. Even if this purpose remains unknown to the patient, the doctor is still fully aware of the dosage and duration of the treatment. Similarly, the divine will does not change. Commands are issued in accurate measure, and the prescription can be applied again later according to the good doctor's discretion.

This is a definitive concept in Sayyid Ahmad's theological framework. The concept of abrogation (*naskh*) has been grossly misapplied as a hermeneutical principle, Sayyid Ahmad argues. In the progress of human development, and in accord with the divine will, prophets established new decrees, and thus effectively abrogated certain doctrines or practices for a respective community. Consider directives given in the Bible, he argues, pertaining to marriage, divorce and diet. These changed over time. Correctly interpreted, however, it can be seen that the respective prophets did not rescind divine injunctions, but rather they understood that injunctions were only applicable to those living under a particular prophetic covenant.

It is essential to note that this view of abrogation also carries a corollary acceptance of the everlasting validity of established religious covenants. This is first introduced in Part 3, then restated in *Tabyīn* Part 1 and again reconfirmed in *Taḥrīr*, and thus provides a key to understanding Sayyid Ahmad's

38 Abdul-Massih Saadi, 'The Letter of John of Sedreh: A New Perspective on Nascent Islam', *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 11, no. 1 (1997): 74–80; Michael Philip Penn, *Envisioning Islam: Syriac Christians and the Early Muslim World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 102–141.

39 Andrew Rippin, 'Abrogation', in *EI*[3].

assessment of the salvific claims of other religions, particular Judaism and Christianity.[40] The question for Sayyid Ahmad was now not how to attain eternal bliss, but how to live now in accordance with the divine will as this would be best for human flourishing. Simply stated, salvation is granted through simple monotheistic faith and this ultimately outweighs any particular doctrinal injunction. The question of how best to live in fidelity to God is disassociated from the soteriological question of what is necessary for eternal salvation.

Sayyid Ahmad's position on abrogation demonstrates the interplay of influences on his work. He often concurred with Shāh Walī Allāh, but not always, and not in this case. As for actual commands found in the Qur'an, Walī Allāh concedes that a limited number of commands have in fact been abrogated.[41] Sayyid Ahmad, on the other hand, insists that not a single Qur'anic command has been abrogated. Shāh Walī Allāh also claims that the *sharīʿa* revealed to subsequent prophets includes corrections for what had become degraded over time.[42] There was a forgetfulness or slippage of practice that eventually required adjustment. Sayyid Ahmad agrees that adjustment was given through subsequent prophetic dispensations, but counters that abrogation does not occur during the ministry of a prophet, and that to say so is incompatible with divine omniscience and immutability.

Though he does not refer to him by name in Discourse 10, Sayyid Ahmad also echoes the ideas of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), who had also sought to correct prevalent understandings of abrogation in his generation. Sayyid Ahmad quotes Ibn ʿArabī extensively in Part 3, where he first presents his view on this subject. As Ibn ʿArabī had stated:

> All the revealed religions (*sharāʾīʿ*) are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religions, the religion of Muḥammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars … This is why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null (*bāṭil*) by abrogation – that is the opinion of the ignorant.[43]

As Yohanan Friedman has convincingly argued, the authority of legislative prophecy never ceases in Ibn ʿArabī's estimation. Subsequent revelation

40 TK, 3: 108–111. Khān, 'Principles of Exegesis', 104–112.

41 Harīrī, *Taḥrīk tafsīr*, 166.

42 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, 11–15. See also Christian W. Troll, 'Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khan's Commentary on the Holy Bible', *Islam and the Modern Age* 7 (1976): 44.

43 Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār Sādir, n.d.), 153.

does not rescind a doctrine, or enact a new injunction that is different in principle.[44] The concept of legislative abrogation was directly associated with supersession. It provided a mechanism by which to legitimize juridical change. The supersessionist view held that the dispensation given by a new legislative prophet abrogated that of a former, but Sayyid Ahmad summarily rejects this view as that of one who is 'ignorant and does not understand Islam'.[45] Existing prophetic covenants, he argued, could be adjusted but not overruled by the advent of a new dispensation.

This is a dynamic view of the interrelation of revealed religions. From Sayyid Ahmad's perspective, a doctrinal law (*ḥukm sharʿī*) could be halted or reinstated over the course of history according to the conditions of a given epoch as determined by prophetic guidance. His most compelling statement, however, concerns the on-going efficacy of covenantal frameworks. In the final discourse of Part 1, Sayyid Ahmad again clarifies his affirmation of the continued efficacy of the Biblical covenants that are foundational to the Jewish and Christian traditions. He circles back to the assertion in Discourse 1, that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are manifestations of the same primordial religion (*dīn*). Their covenants remain effective for their respective adherents. Neither the covenants nor their doctrinal laws (*ḥukm sharʿī*) 'become superseded or abrogated, or subsumed one into the other'. Lest this be misconceived as pertaining only to diet or conduct, Sayyid Ahmad specifies that 'prayers, songs, and any forms of worship that have been permitted by any prophet are eternally valid and not subject to change'.[46] In essence, he is saying that the manner in which Jews, Christians and Muslims pray, sing, fast and go about the practice of their respective faiths is to be recognized and respected, rather than dismissed as lacking, incomplete or superseded. Furthermore, he demonstrates this conviction through his own conduct and by participating in 'Christian *namaz* (ritual prayer)' and by partaking of meals prepared according to their dietary customs.[47]

In conclusion, Part 1 serves as a prolegomenon to the *Tabyīn* venture. The aim is to draw Muslims and Christians together into the study of the Bible in light of revelation granted to Muḥammad. In effect, Sayyid Ahmad is attempting to create a level playing field, a parity that allows for the Bible and the Qur'an to elucidate one another. He affirms the texts as found in their present

44 Yohanan Friedman, *Prophecy Continuous* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 71–75.

45 TK, 3: 110.

46 TK, 1: 268.

47 Zia Uddin Lahori, *Khud navisht hayāt Sir Sayyid* (New Delhi: Aqif Book Depot, 2005), 178–179, quoting Sayyid Ahmad's 'Travelers in London' (*Musāfirān-i London*).

form, and recognizes that the religious covenants of their respective adherents are ultimately salvific. Having considered the introductory discourses in Part 1, let us turn to the exegesis of the Book of Genesis found in Part 2.

6 *Tabyīn* Part 2

As promised in the introductory discourses of Part 1, Sayyid Ahmad sets out to ponder this first book of the Bible without attributing any distinction or priority to the testimony of one prophetic text over another. Starting from the beginning at Genesis 1:1, each verse is cross-referenced with related passages in the Qur'an and the New Testament. The Hebrew text is presented with English and Urdu interlinear translation in one column, and related passages from the Qur'an and Hadith in Arabic, along with their Urdu and English renderings on the opposite column. Commentary is presented in a section delineated from the text, and the author's exposition is supplemented with notes from Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholarly sources.

As stated in Parts 1 and 3, Sayyid Ahmad explains that the first five books in the present Hebrew Bible are to be 'comprehended under the name of *Tawrāt* [Torah]'.[48] In other words, this Torah is that which was commended in the Qur'an. This, along with Ezra's recension and Jesus's confirmation, was sufficient testimony for these writings to be deemed assuredly sound and without textual adulteration (*taḥrīf-i lafẓī*). He reaffirms, however, the view that the meaning of these sacred scriptures has indeed been compromised (*taḥrīf-i maʿānī*).

In this light, the task of present interpreters – or should we say reformers – was to free the Torah from the clutches of dogma, be it Jewish, Christian or Muslim. In order to confront such accretions, and to free the text from the clutches of human custom and tradition, he introduces a principle that would characterize his hermeneutical method from here on, namely that revelation operates in accordance with reason. Simple reason must determine whether a verse is to be read figuratively or literally. If natural revelation, or more precisely the law of nature, is the original *sharīʿa*, then this cannot be negated. If revelation, including prophetic speech, exists within nature (*ṭawr ʿl-fitrat*), it must conform to this divinely pre-established order. The second principle established in the study of Genesis is that texts have internal coherence, and this affects interpretation. Priority must be given to information located within the text, rather than in external sources or even in subsequent revelation.

48 TK, 2: 8.

The application of these principles marks the beginning of a lifelong quest – which begins here but persists throughout Sayyid Ahmad's career – to identify interpretative principles that could become standardized and adopted by all interpreters. This was a pivotal moment in his journey of intellect and faith. We now consider selected passages that illustrate his use of these principles and his engagement with the Biblical text.

7 To Reconcile Scripture and Science

The Book of Genesis provides the staging ground from where Sayyid Ahmad announces his most quoted interpretative premise: God's word does not contravene God's work. Many Christian scholars, he observes, have demanded information from Genesis that the text was never intended to provide. 'Revelation was not sent to correct scientific knowledge,' as Sayyid Ahmad explains, 'but rather to impart spiritual instruction and eternal salvation'.[49] Apologists such as John Muir, brother of William Muir and an Orientalist in his own right, claimed that the proof of the Christian faith is that it is reasonable and evidenced by nature. Restating Paley's standard position, Muir argued that miracles were necessary because they 'testified to the true measure of a religion's universal veracity'.[50] Salvation history culminated in Christ, he argued, and this was predicted in the Hebrew Bible and evidenced by the miracles it recounted. Sayyid Ahmad, however, fundamentally opposes this method of adducing truth. The measure in which a religion was founded upon sound reason, he argued, was a truer assessment of its merit. Miracles occur when natural events transpire at a wondrous time, but supernatural phenomena contravene the divine will and design. God does not intervene in the cosmos. In Sayyid Ahmad's hypothesis, divine provenance sculpts creation as well as scripture, and therefore – when properly read – it is true in every age.

Sayyid Ahmad's commentary on the creation accounts in Genesis 1 exemplify his interpretative method. On the column opposite the text of Genesis 1:1, for example, is the text of Q 61:1 and Q 39:62–63. These are parallel passages that recount creation by divine fiat. Related Biblical references are also listed in the margins, including John 1:1–2, Hebrews 1:10, Psalm 8:3, but also passages from the books of Jeremiah and Zachariah in the Hebrew Bible, and Acts and

49 TK, 2: 35. Sayyid Ahmad's statement closely parallels concerns raised by Unitarians and 'Broad Churchmen' who had become increasingly at odds with mainline Christian thinkers in both England and India.

50 Powell, *Scottish Orientalists*, 87.

Colossians in the New Testament. Their inclusion speaks to Sayyid Ahmad's intention to address the breadth of passages associated with creation, and they attest to his familiarity with the Bible at large.

His exposition begins with a reference taken from Rashi, an eleventh-century Jewish Bible commentator who said, 'Genesis is not about the procedure of creation, but rather about the primacy of creation', which demonstrates God's majestic omnipotence.[51] Building upon this, Sayyid Ahmad explains that creation established the original and primary law at work in the universe. The 'law of nature' (*qānūn al-fiṭra*) entails all of the processes set in motion by God in creation; and these are everlasting and cannot be amended.[52] 'The almighty author of the law given to the prophets first instituted the laws of nature … these are eternal and in perfect harmony with the unvarying law of cause and effect'.[53] God's first 'word' is heard in creation, and in creation is where prophets articulated the revealed word of God. Revelation, Sayyid Ahmad argues, proceeds in response and in conformity to the original *sharī'a*, and this continues to be readily observable in nature today.

The subsequent verses of Genesis 1 describe how creation came about. Attention shifts from the medieval Jewish thinker to a contemporary Anglican Biblicist, Thomas Horne (d. 1862). Horne was a conservative mainline thinker, and he insisted that the events recorded in Genesis 1 were historical and that the account must be read literally. These scriptures attest, Horne claimed, to creation *ex nihilo*, which was fully accomplished in seven 24-hour periods. Horne dogmatically argued that the passage cannot be read figuratively and that there is no middle way: 'it must be one or the other'. Furthermore, to read the passage 'allegorically', Horne claimed, was to challenge the historical veracity of not only this creation account, but also of the Bible in its entirety. To not read the creation account literally is to cast the Bible into 'doubt and obscurity'. To reject the veracity of the account is to 'shake [Christianity] to its very basis'.[54] For Horne, as it was with many expositors in his increasingly polarized setting, reason must conform to revelation, and science to the Bible. As can be seen, the opening pages of the commentary on Genesis demonstrate a substantial awareness of the interpretative issues confronting British Christians in this period as introduced in the previous chapter.

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51 TK, 2: 38. For greateer detail, see Menachen Mendel Schneerson and Y. Eliezer Danzinger, eds., *Studies in Rashi* (New York: Kehot Publications Society, 2012).

52 TK, 2: 38.

53 Ibid., 39.

54 Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, (London: T. Cadell, 1818), 35–38; Alfred Barry, *Introduction to the study of the Old Testament* (London: John W. Parker and Sons, 1856), 72–75.

Sayyid Ahmad takes particular issue with Horne's insistence upon a literal interpretation of the text. Apparently, for Horne, accepting a less than literal reading of this creation account was tantamount to the rejection of the inspired status of the Bible. 'The very basis' of Christian doctrine, as Horne claimed, could only be sustained by a literal reading. This line of thinking was not unfamiliar to Muslim interpreters of the Qurʾan in the Indian context. The constraints caused by a literal reading of scripture are a matter of historical concern for Muslims as well as for Christians. Recalling the debate between the Ashʿarīs and Muʿtazilīs concerning the literal and metaphorical interpretation of anthropomorphic descriptions of the divine being (e.g. 'taking His seat upon a throne', or 'weighing our deeds in a scale'), Sayyid Ahmad rejects Horne's view as contrived and unacceptably rigid.[55]

> By insisting on this premise, these Christian interpreters have been taken with a similar malady as Muslims who are stuck in blind repetition (*taqlīd*), and who are guilty of the sin of association (*shirk*). They confused their own words for those of God and made the text an idol (*but*).[56]

Sayyid Ahmad is crossing religious boundaries and engaging with the text and its interpreters. In his estimation, Horne had committed two crucial errors. He failed to maintain the separation between issues of inspiration and interpretation, and he ignored the need to blend a figurative and literal reading.[57] This is the first occasion when Sayyid Ahmad articulates the need for expositors to find standards, or a basic agreement, for hermeneutical principles. If Genesis is a sacred scripture shared by multiple faith traditions, it stands to reason he argues, that there should be some degree of reasonable agreement on how the text should be read.

Towards this end, Sayyid Ahmad suggests parameters for determining when a passage should be read figuratively rather than literally. His proposal is that the literal meaning (*ḥaqīqī maʿna*) should be considered first. If a literal meaning is not 'reasonable', a figurative alternative must be considered, such as allegory, metaphor or simile (*tamsīlī maʿna murād, majāz yā istaʿārā*).[58] Such nimble blending of literal and figurative approaches, he notes, is well documented among classical exegetes but he proceeds to add two significant

55 Daniel Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ashʿarī* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1990), 195.
56 TK, 2: 341.
57 Ibid., 59.
58 Ibid., 31.

qualifications.[59] First, 'reasonable' should be understood as being in conformity to the law of nature, or that which is readily observable through science. If the fossil record, for example, evidences an old earth, then the 'days' of creation require a figurative interpretation.[60]

The second qualifier is that figurative readings must be restricted to pertinent passages that 'suit the subject'.[61] In other words, Sayyid Ahmad seeks to limit the range of possible interpretations on the basis of the context and structure in which the passage is found. In this case, the interpreter should give priority to information found within the chapter, and then subsequently in the Book of Genesis as a whole. Sayyid Ahmad provides references, for example, to passages related to the subject of creation that are found in other books in the Bible, and in the Qur'an and Hadith, but he gives interpretative priority to the most proximate, those found within Genesis. The quest to identify interpretative principles is a defining characteristic that persisted throughout Sayyid Ahmad's intellectual journey. Both of the principles noted above were subsequently reaffirmed later in his study of the Qur'an, and they endured as foundational guideposts in his interpretative method.

The identification of these principles helps to clarify why Sayyid Ahmad reads certain passages literally but not others. This remained a point of confusion in at least one previous study, which led to the erroneous view that Sayyid Ahmad adhered to a view of creation derived from a literal reading of Genesis, but this is positively not the case.[62] Consider the extremely long life enjoyed by Seth and Noah, for example. Sayyid Ahmad accepts the account as historical, but he does not accept the dating. He does not take issue with the possibility of persons living longer – even considerably longer – than they do presently. The dates, however, calculated from information in the text should not be read literally because they do not conform to scientific data. The creation narratives are understood to relate not to the lives of historical persons, but to events, and they require a figurative reading.

The confusion stems from authorial statements that must be read in context. Sayyid Ahmed affirms, for example, that creation occurred by divine fiat, 'be, and it is' (*kun fā-yakūn*) as stated in the Qur'an. He also asserts that 'God created all at one time'.[63] If these statements are taken out of context and read apart from the rest of his exposition, it would appear that he adheres to

59 James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 1–46.

60 TK, 2 :31.

61 Ibid.

62 Schaefer, 'Studies in Sayyid Ahmad Khan', 43.

63 TK, 2: 46.

a view of *ex nihilo* creation, or that he accepts a literal reading of the Genesis account. A close reading of Sayyid Ahmad's exposition, however, leads to a considerably different conclusion and discloses an underpinning worldview that is radically different from that of his Christian counterparts. As Sayyid Ahmad explains, the divine will (*irādah*) once spoken – 'be' – was certain to be accomplished.[64] The timing and progression, however, proceeded gradually through inherent natural processes (*nechar ke qā'idē ke mutābiq*).[65] Once the law of nature was established, the divine will proceeded in conformity with it through cause and effect. Thus, for Sayyid Ahmad, scripture affirms a process of evolutionary creation.

Creation is evolutionary. It comes about in phases, over time, as observable in the fossil record. Sayyid Ahmad's acceptance of this conclusion shaped his reading of the creation account in Genesis 1. From among the 'six days of creation', he differentiates those that occurred before and after the 'law of nature' was instituted. Pronouncements prior to its institution were not bound to common measurements of time. 'Evening and morning' did not refer to a twenty-four-hour period, but rather to prolonged phases of development: the 'full courses of darkness and light' necessary for a particular development. It was not until the 'fourth day', when the sun and moon were created, that the law took effect. Once this was set in motion, God no longer intervened directly, and the continuing processes of cause and effect proceed unhindered by supernatural forces, as Sayyid Ahmad understood to be indicated in the Qur'an (Q 25:2).[66]

Though begun by divine fiat, creation was accomplished gradually in phases through secondary causation. 'Development was affected in a moment; yet, it was necessary that this occur in a manner that advances by degree'.[67] The divine will was expressed in typological patterns and infinitely repeated. Once created, 'it pleased the all-independent God to leave to it the future continuation and regularity of his works'.[68] As summarized later, 'the divine essence is the cause of causes (*'illat al-'ilal*) of all things'.[69] All that was 'needed to be done was done, and nothing remained to be done – all was set in motion'.[70]

64 Ibid., 114.
65 Ibid., 74. References to the Qur'an are listed (Q 10: 5; 2:189; 6:96–97; 49:16, 18) but no authorial comment is provided.
66 Ibid., 39.
67 Ibid., 52.
68 Ibid., 68.
69 Troll, 'Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and His Theological Critics', 2.
70 TK, 2: 68.

This appears at first glance to be an application of Uniformitarianism, or the view that the same natural laws and processes observably at work have always operated in this way and apply everywhere in the universe. Perhaps this was simply Sayyid Ahmad's application of the watchmaker analogy, a common enough view in certain circles in India. But if his exposition was inspired by Europeans, he certainly does not indicate it here. He does not appeal to any European sources, but rather presents a description of the evolutionary process in the language of Mullā Ṣadrā's (Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Shirazī, d. 1640) unique doctrine of 'motion-in-substance' (*ḥaraka jawhariyya*).[71]

As Fazlur Rahman has convincingly argued, by synthesizing elements of Ibn ʿArabī's theosophy, Ibn Sīnā's peripatetic tradition, and al-Suhrawardī's Illuminationist tradition, Ṣadrā's metaphysics constituted the pinnacle of Muslim philosophy in India. To put this in context, as Jalāl al-Dīn Āshtiyānī has summarized it, 'It may be said that with the birth of Mullā Ṣadrā, Metaphsysics came to maturity in the East in the same measure as [at that point of time] natural sciences progressed in the West'.[72] Ṣadrā posited that the divine essence is manifest in the created realm as 'Self-unfolding Existence' (*tashkīk*). 'In sum, it is this doctrine of *tashkīk*, as Fazlur Rahman explains, "according to which existence continuously evolves, which constitutes the very pivot of Ṣadrā's philosophy"'.[73] Sayyid Ahmad applies this metaphysical understanding to the natural sciences. Like Ṣadrā before him, Sayyid Ahmad perceives all created matter as contingent. The 'Self-unfolding' proceeded through cause and effect – the foundational 'law of nature' – and has progressed without the possibility of being altered by divine intervention. This is God's first law – never to be abrogated – and it is reasonable to assume that God abides by God's own laws.

Though not stated, references to earlier theological debates can also be inferred in Sayyid Ahmad's Genesis exegesis. The translation of textbooks on the 'new sciences', as Gordon Campbell has keenly observed, added additional vigour to local disputes concerning the views of the Asharīs and Muʿtazilīs concerning divine involvement in creation.[74] For proponents of Ashʿārī negation, there could ultimately be no action without direct divine causation. As the Deoband scholar Muḥammad Ismāʿīl has argued,

71 Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 12–16.

72 Ibid., 20.

73 Ibid., 12–13.

74 Gordon Campbell, 'Sir Syed Memorial Lecture', *Aligarh Muslim University Gazette* 50 (2013): 13–16.

> Verily the power of this Shah of Shahs is so great that in an instant, solely by pronouncing the command 'Be!' God can create millions of prophets, saints, djinn, and angels equal to Gabriel and Muḥammad, or in a single breath, can turn the whole universe upside down and bestow upon it a wholly new creation.[75]

In this position, the interplay of natural forces and cause and effect proceeds according to divine command. The apple falls not due to gravity, but rather first because of a deliberate divine action. For Sayyid Ahmad, however, evidence from the natural and metaphysical sciences strengthens the claim that there is perpetual motion apart from constant divine intervention. All causes are contingent except for the ultimate cause, or the prime mover.

This draws attention to the Muʿtazilī undertones in Sayyid Ahmad's writings. Theologians such ʿAbd al-Jabbār posited that God's Oneness (*tawḥīd*) and justice (*ʿadl*) require that divine attributes (*ṣifāt*) are not eternal.[76] This is congruent with Sayyid Ahmad's position that all attributes, including divine speech (*kalām*), which becomes manifest as the 'word of God' recorded in scripture, must be generated and brought into existence. That which is implicit in God becomes explicit in creation. As these rationalist precursors also insisted, however, true monotheism requires that the divine essence (*dhāt*) remain utterly transcendent. The Creator, who is pure existence, is utterly separate from creation; yet the divine attributes remain effectively manifest in the realm of human experience and operative through the contingent modes of existence. This was the doctrine of Ṣadrā, Aḥmad Sirhindī, Shāh Walī Allāh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, namely that God 'includes and transcends all things'; this is the doctrine of 'unity-in-diversity and diversity-in-unity' (*al-waḥda fī 'l-kathra wa-'l-kathra fī 'l waḥda*).[77]

The Muʿtazilī concern for divine justice can also be readily perceived in Sayyid Ahmad's exegesis of Genesis 3 and the issue of sin. There cannot be both an 'arbitrariness of His will', as Daud Rahbar cogently summarises it, and

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75 Ingram, 'Sufis, Scholars and Scapegoats', 483. This is drawn from the discussion between the prominent scholars Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl (d. 1831) and Fazl-ī Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d. 1861) concerning divine sovereignty. The theoretical discussion concerned whether or not God could have replaced Muḥammad with another prophet, or could create more prophets in the future. For a detail examination of this exchange and its setting see SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 2020).

76 J.R.T.M. Peters, *God's Created Speech: A Study in the Speculative Theology of the Muʿtazilî Qâḍî l-Quḍât Abû l-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbâr bin Aḥmad al-Hamaḏânî* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 135–189.

77 Rahman, *Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, 90–91.

the 'predestination of human action'.[78] If God causes sin, judging the sinner for it contravenes the very possibility of justice. Conversely, there were those who took an extreme position on pre-determination that diminished personal responsibility. Sayyid Ahmad applies related terms here to contemplate the Biblical narrative. Divine justice, he reasons, forbids the existence of the divine essence in the created world, for divine purity cannot abide in the sinful world. Existence occurs apart from essence because, as he quotes the Prophetic tradition, 'God determined before creation that in his treatment of subjects His mercy would surpass His justice or wrath'.[79] Sayyid Ahmad later reiterates this view with further support from Hadith: 'The perfection of loyalty to Him consists of removing the attributes from Him (*wa-kamāl al-ikhlāṣ lahu nafy al-ṣifāt 'anhu*)'.[80] God the Creator foreknew the contingency of human action and the inevitability of sin, and remains utterly separate in essence from the created cosmos. All that transpires, including the reception of prophetic revelation, proceeds through cause and affect according to the laws of nature instituted at creation.

The rationalism that undergirds Sayyid Ahmad's reading of the creation account raises questions regarding the degree of influence exerted upon him by European natural philosophers. This degree of rationalism appears anomalous when juxtaposed with the thinking of certain co-religionists of his day, and is far closer to strands of modern European thought. While Deists and Unitarians reached some parallel conclusions, it is important to note that they approached the subject of creation through a different line of metaphysical reasoning. I shall discuss this subject in greater detail in Chapter 5, but one example from the Genesis exegesis is illustrative of the difficulty in presuming dependence on European ideas.

The example is found in Sayyid Ahmad's comparison between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2. He proposes that these are accounts of two different historical cycles of creation. This interpretative solution provides a glimpse of the originality of his approach, and yet of continuity with philosophers from within his own tradition. In Sayyid Ahmad's estimation, the existence of these two creation accounts reveals that there have been multiple creations of humans. The present 'brood of Adam' is not the first, and possibly not the last .[81] Within the phases of natural development, Sayyid Ahmad suggests that

78 Rahbar, *God of Justice*, 7.

79 TK, 2: 40. The Hadith is cited from the *Mishkāt* without further detail.

80 TFA, 3: Part 3, 111; N. Hanif and Nagendra K. Singh, *God in Indian Islamic Theology* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 1996), 187.

81 TK, 2: 86. This is a contested theory, but some scientists agree with this notion. See Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

there were countless Adams and Eves before the ancestors of the human race now living. Catastrophes annihilate, he explained, but there is re-generation. In Sayyid Ahmad's reading, Genesis refers to at least two cycles of human creation. Humans were generated (*paidā*) according to the processes of cause and effect instituted in the 'law of nature'. Therefore, the processes that first generated life – however this may have come about – remain viable.[82] Given the right conditions, another 'Adam', an original line of *homo sapiens*, independent from the present species, could yet be to come.

This reading is original, and the line of reasoning is instructive. It is interesting to note that Sayyid Ahmad was familiar with the 'multiple source' (Elohist and Jahwist) theory, which sought to account for these different narratives and was gaining increasing acceptance in Biblical scholarship. He understood that the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was being seriously challenged in European scholarship.[83] He could have evaluated the merits of this view, and explored the formation of the text, but this is not the approach he chose. He insists throughout the *Tabyīn*, and later in the study of the Qur'an, that scripture must be studied as received. His purpose was not to undermine the texts, but rather to draw out a reading – even if by extreme speculation – that reconciled the text with the findings of modern science, and thus testified to the prescient genius articulated in the prophetic word.

It is also worth noting that Sayyid Ahmad provides very few references to scientific sources. He makes frequent allusions to theories that were gaining currency in his time, but seldom provides references. This is noteworthy because the Scientific Society in Ghazipur, in which Sayyid Ahmad was very active, translated books by a range of natural philosophers such as Carl Linnaeus, Charles Lyell, Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck in the period around the composition of *Tabyīn*. He alludes to their ideas but for unspecified reasons, Sayyid Ahmad does not credit European scientists in his view of creation.

One explanation is that he may have sought, consciously or not, to underplay the influence of European thinkers on his work. Although he sometimes lauded European progress, he seems determined not to cede ground on this battlefield of ideas.[84] There is a subtle avoidance that may foreshadow the conviction expressed later that Europe's 'new sciences' were established on

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 348.

84 Abdur Rehman Kidwai, 'Westward Bound: Sir Syed's Quest for Knowledge in his Travelogue, *Musafiran-i London* (1869)', in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Muslim Renaissance Man of India*, ed. A.R. Kidwai (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2017), 131–139.

foundations constructed by earlier Muslim scholars, without whose help modern science, in its present form, could never have developed.[85] Consider for example, that even though Sayyid Ahmad is discussing the idea of natural evolution, he never overtly gives attention to Charles Darwin's work. One inference might be that Sayyid Ahmad credited the foundational concept to Muslim natural philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā, though he is not cited in *Tabyīn* either.[86] Ṣadrā had theorized that all created matter was composed of an original substance that proceeds successively towards greater individuation. The difference between a human and a tree, as noted in the Genesis exegesis, is one of gradation because they are composed of the same substance. The embodied person is never fully disconnected from the surrounding world as they are of one substance. From Sayyid Ahmad's vantage point, the findings of contemporary natural scientists testify to the progress already attained in Muslim civilization in general, and in natural philosophy in particular.[87] If European post-Enlightenment thinkers stood on the shoulders of Muslim philosophers, then to study their works was not to embrace the foreign, but rather to rediscover the indigenous.

Thus, one can see how the study of the 'new sciences' catalysed Sayyid Ahmad into a deeper exploration of the stores of natural philosophy in Muslim thought. The Genesis commentary is informed by these earlier ideas that resonated with developments in the natural and mechanical sciences. 'People will not in the present state of our knowledge', Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'believe in the successive connection and resemblance of creatures among themselves … but hopefully science will prove this and increase belief in the accuracy and truth of that which proceeded from the pen of the inspired writers'.[88] Many allusions are made without attribution and yet the final conclusion is original, and uniquely his own: '[there have been] countless Adams before the one from whom humanity is now descended'.[89] The earth and the heavens are the

85 Khan, *Series of Essays*, 440–442.

86 Zailan Morris, *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason in the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra: An Analysis of the al-Hikmah al-ʿArshiyyah* (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 90–98.

87 TK, 2: 53. Sayyid Ahmad did not seem to be aware of the profound differences between his thinking and that of the European sources with which he interacted. Though he shares a commitment to objectivity, his thinking does not reflect the Cartesian ideal of the detached and disengaged master-subject. He seems to be closer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty in affirming 'I do not have a body; I am a body'. See Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other: Ricoeur and the Fragility of Interreligious Encounters* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 31.

88 TK, 2: 55.

89 Ibid., 91.

same, but there are different Adams, and the present one may possibly not be the last. If the current population becomes extinct, the world may yet be re-populated. The number of human flourishings prior to the present is not known, and neither are those yet to come. This is a remarkable perspective to say the least.

8 The Garden: What Did Transpire?

Sayyid Ahmad reads Genesis 3 as a metaphorical account of human development. Adam and Eve are regarded as historical persons, but ones gravely misrepresented by Christian and Jewish readers. Their disobedience in the Garden of Eden, he explains, has been erroneously perceived as 'the fall', or the point in time when human destiny was eternally changed by the misuse of human freedom. For Christians, this is the 'original sin' that shifted the human condition, creating a state of separation between God and humans that could only be rectified by the atoning sacrificial death of Jesus the Christ. But, for Sayyid Ahmad, the Genesis account does not concern a heavenly battle between good and evil at all; rather it is a tale of human self-awareness. In eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the couple attained the 'light of knowledge' that is inevitably experienced when one reaches the age of accountability. The place and events concerned are historical. The garden and the tree are on earth, possibly in Palestine.[90] Though the place is real, the passage narrates metaphorically (*ista'ārah*) the experience of self-discovery and the assumption of responsibility that comes with maturity.[91]

At the heart of Sayyid Ahmad's reading is the view that sin cannot occur apart from knowledge of the law. Adam and Eve 'took of the fruit' before the establishment of doctrinal law (*ḥukm shar'ī*). They were bound only by the laws of nature, as no other law had yet been revealed. Adam was not legally forbidden to eat the fruit, though he was 'advised' by God to abstain, even as a parent would offer guidance to a child. This is not a transgression of law, and therefore it is not technically sin (*ghunāh shar'ī*). Overlooking a sign (*ishārah*), he explains, is no more a sin than breaking a law of nature, though each has its own consequences.

90 TK, 2: 102. Testimony from Qāḍi 'Iyāḍ Andalusī (d. 1149), Abū al-Qāsim Balkhī (d. 931), and Abū Muslim (ca. 815), as cited from al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Q 2:35).

91 See also *Adam ki sarguzasht* (The Story of Adam), printed in *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq* in May 1872, and cited in Troll, 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan and His Theological Critics', 262.

The question of whether Adam and Eve sinned is a matter of contention in traditional Muslim and Christian theology. According to the former, prophets are protected from sinning and, according to the latter only Jesus was sinless, so only he can be the blameless and perfect sacrifice. Sayyid Ahmad, in his characteristic style, manages to disagree with both. He does not agree that prophets were immune from sin. There are two types of sin, he explains: legislative (*sharʿī*), which includes acts of commission, and mystical (*ʿirfānī*), which includes acts of omission. Citing Abū Ḥurayra, a principal authority in the *Mishkāt*, Sayyid Ahmad states that the Islamic position is that 'all have sinned'. Lest the Christian reader disagree, Sayyid Ahmad notes, even Jesus stated 'Only God is good' (Matthew 19: 16–17). Even the most exalted persons commit sin, if not of the first type, then at least of the second. While he assures readers that prophets do not err in matters of to religion (*dīn*), Sayyid Ahmad explains that sins of omission are ontological and, therefore, inescapable. Humans are, by definition, not perfect, and none can render the perfect service that God deserves. It is for this reason that all persons, including prophets, must acknowledge their guilt and humbly implore mercy and forgiveness. Like the Prophet of Islam, each must learn to subdue 'Satan and attend only to doing good'.[92] With a final appeal to St Paul's description of 'the flesh' in the New Testament, Sayyid Ahmad summarizes that temptation stems from base human instincts, and these base instincts, along with common human frailties, result in sin and must be overcome through determination and concerted struggle (*ijtiḥād*).[93]

This admission of prophetic sin provides an early glimpse of Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of the prophetic person and experience. Prophets, as he explains here in the reading of Genesis and reiterates later in *Tafsīr*, are not physiologically different from other people. The difference is that prophets, like other exalted spiritual personalities, excel in fidelity to God through the mastering of their 'base instincts'. Prophets, like everyone else, suffer temptation due to their animal (*ḥayawān*) instincts, and the 'satan' in their veins. But these select few, as Sayyid Ahmad has already clarified in Part 1, arose and stayed faithful to their vocation through arduous perseverance (*ijtiḥād*).[94]

Having considered sin in the garden narrative, Sayyid Ahmad turns to address Christian soteriology. The Genesis account, he explains, does not account for the entry of sin into the world or the creation of an eternal chasm between God and humanity. The consequences of the sin in the garden cannot

92 TK, 2: 150.
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 1: 24–25.

plausibly require eternal punishment either for the actors, their descendants, or the whole human race, as Christian theologians have stated. They look to the first chapters of Genesis to lay the foundation for the doctrine of original sin, and the corresponding belief that the human condition requires atonement. If the text were read simply and apart from tradition, he argues, this meaning does not readily appear. He then reiterates the Muslim view that repentance and simple faith are all that is required for salvation: prophetic messages declare God's mercy, and ensure that the doors of eternal life remain open to all who humbly attempt to come back through repentance and submission to God's will and commands.[95] The simplicity of his conclusion is important, and its profound significance for his soteriology and broader theology will be taken up later in this chapter.

Properly read, the account of the 'tree and its fruit' is a metaphor about assuming responsibility for one's actions.[96] He again takes Christian theologians to task for reading the passage literally and for seeking to establish that decay and physical death are consequences of sin.[97] Eating the fruit led to awareness of right and wrong, and of the inevitable system of reward and punishment implemented in human society.[98] This was a spiritual and psychological experience, not an account of how physical death first came about. For Sayyid Ahmad, this is a metaphorical account of the end of innocence and the consequent awareness of sin, pain and death. Adam and Eve, like any other person, became conscious of the fact that what one does, or fails to do, has lasting consequences.

As the commentary progresses, Sayyid Ahmad's effort to unravel Christian doctrine become more strident. Particular attention is given to the way Christian exegetes locate in these first chapters of Genesis evidence for the necessity of atoning sacrifice as a salvific typology. In Christian belief, the sin of the first Adam was redeemed by the sacrifice of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Sayyid Ahmad sought to refute the logic of this salvific narrative by isolating the actual verses from tradition. If Adam and Eve did not commit a punishable sin, there was no need for atonement. Yet, even if they did sin, he asks, how could a blood sacrifice atone for the error?

95 Ibid., 2: 182.

96 Ibid., 124.

97 Beveridge and Hale are cited without further information. It is likely that this refers to Henry Beveridge, translator of the 1845 edition of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Hale might be a mistranslation of Allen, as in John Allen (d. 1839), who was also a translator of the *Institutes*.

98 TK, 2: 173.

Christian interpreters read the account as a typology for God's sacrificial provision to cover sin and shame, a foreshadowing of Jesus's death on the cross. But Sayyid Ahmad counters that a better interpretation of the events is that Adam killed an animal 'by God's sanction' in order to make garments. As the author of all creation, God provided for Adam's needs, and the text allows for nothing more. He also notes that the wording does not describe the provision as a sacrifice, and this was only inferred later by tradition. The final issue he raises is that the narrative does not contain information particular to Jesus. Sayyid Ahmad affirms that Christ is the healer (*shāfī*) and bringer of salvation, but notes that this truth is not found in these verses. The grace and mercy necessary for salvation were adequately provided in the clear warnings and divine ordinances presented by all the prophets.[99]

9 Conclusion to Genesis

The commentary on Genesis 1–11 demonstrates Sayyid Ahmad's experimental approach to interpretation. The work provides a benchmark for new developments in his progress as a thinker determined to reconcile received knowledge (*naql*) with reason (*ʿaql*). He contests foundational elements of Christian and Muslim theology, such as creation, sin and salvation, and seeks to demonstrate the value of a rationalist approach to exegesis. He repeatedly applies the language of 'cause and effect' to express the way the divine will continues to operate in creation. God's word, recorded in scripture, is read in assumed conformity to God's work.

Though the ambitious plan for a commentary on the entire Bible was never fulfilled, this final instalment of the *Tabyīn* project provides an important benchmark in Sayyid Ahmad's intellectual development. It is in this study of Genesis that he first expresses a crystalized naturalist view and categorically rejects the supernatural. It is also in this text that he first states the interpretative importance of textual coherence (*naẓm*), or the contextualizing order and arrangement within a text. His subsequent study of the Qurʾan carried forward both of these principles, even as he continued on a quest to identify other hermeneutical devices too. From here, we shall follow the order in which Sayyid Ahmad presented *Tabyīn* in his republished works. We shall divert back to his earliest exegetical writings on the Bible as found in *Tabyīn* Part 3.

99 Ibid., 1: 31, 62.

10 *Tabyīn* Part 3

The contents listed by the author provide an introductory summary to Part 3: A concise history of the Christian religion (*madhhab*) up to the emergence of the Muslim religion (*madhhab*); Jewish religion (*madhhab*) prior to Christianity; the [writings of the] *'ulamā'* of *waḥdat al-wujūd* regarding Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ (Honoured Messiah); the era, context and preaching of Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ; Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ's disciples; disagreement [among Christians] over the divinity of Christ [in 13 examples]; the identity of St Matthew, and the date and language of his Gospel's composition. Sayyid Ahmad also includes a table of contents for each of the five chapters. Chapter 1: issues concerning Ḥaḍhrat 'Īsā's (Honoured Jesus) lineage. Chapter 2: the Magi search for Christ; Joseph and Egypt; the Bethlehem infanticide; and Joseph brings Christ back [to Judea]. Chapter 3: an account of Yaḥya (John the Baptist); and the baptism (*iṣṭebāgh pana*) of Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ. Chapter 4: Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ's temptation by Satan; and the beginning of Ḥaḍhrat Masiḥ's preaching and counselling. Chapter 5: the principles and counsels given to the people; Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ preaches on the mountain; explanation of who is blessed; the disciples are like salt and light; the Masīḥ came to fulfil God's command (*ḥukm*); killing and anger forbidden; adultery forbidden; swearing by anything forbidden; injustice to be endured with patience; enemies to be regarded as friends.

As noted in the previous chapter, the commentary on Matthew (1–5) was the prototype for Sayyid Ahmad's commentary on the Bible. It is the earliest of the *Tabyīn* series, and contains information that is useful for understanding the author's initial approach to the project. His intention was to undertake a critical reading of the Gospel, in the light of the Qur'an's message of *tawḥīd*, unencumbered by preconceived interpretations.

In Part 3, even more than in other portions, Sayyid Ahmad expresses incontrovertible support for the authenticity of the Biblical revelation. The present text of Matthew, he writes, 'is the same as that read by the earliest disciples … to think that their *Injīl* and our present *Injīl* are different is absolutely incorrect'.[100] He goes on to say, 'In my view, the essential point is this: the word of St Matthew – beyond any doubt – is worthy of acceptance'.[101] The view that the present text of Matthew's Gospel is the same as that known by this name to early Christians is an important clarification. It addresses the concerns of Muslims such as Kairānawī, who rejected the present text as corrupted beyond repair, but also those of Unitarian Christians, like those in Calcutta

100 Ibid., 3: 25.
101 Ibid.

who had omitted Chapter 1 in their publication of the Gospel of Matthew. Sayyid Ahmad holds that the present form and structure of the Gospel reflects the original. He also takes pains to clarify here, as he does again in Part 1, that what the Qur'an refers to as the *Injīl* is not what Christians call the Gospel of Matthew, but rather the New Testament. Thus, in Part 3 he presents an unequivocal view that the Gospel of Matthew is an integral and faithful portion of what is referred to in the Qur'an.

Given the historical Muslim concerns about the Bible, this exceedingly positive assessment of the Gospel of Matthew calls for an explanation. Consider the resolve, for example, in this statement: 'St Matthew wrote this verse concerning the return of the Honoured Messiah (*Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ*) as informed by the Holy Spirit. Hence, doubtless it occurred exactly in this manner'.[102] The explanation provided by our author, however, is unsettlingly subjective. Sayyid Ahmad accepts the Gospel of Matthew in its present form as authoritative because of the spiritual encounter he experienced in reading the text. He describes this experience in the commentary on Matthew 5:1–2:

> It brings about a great effect in the person. When someone with a good heart reads this, he encounters at that very moment the bright light that enables the heart to firmly believe; this is the effect of the same Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*) that until then was contained in the words.[103]

The effect on 'the heart' convinces the reader of its veracity. The power of the 'Holy Spirit' in the words stirs the heart to faith. This is highly personal and subjective language. In short, Matthew's writing is divinely inspired, and therefore it is correct. Sayyid Ahmad is convinced of the text's veracity because of the spiritual effect – the 'peace of heart' – he experienced in reading the text.

Despite this apparently subjective reason for the author's attitude to the Gospel, Part 3 remains a judicious study with enough merit to draw several Muslim *maulvis*, Christian missionaries and Jewish thinkers into its orbit. One reason for this is that Sayyid Ahmad's writing in Part 3 evidences his promised candour and objectivity. In summary, Sayyid Ahmad argues that the writings of 'St Matthew' are inspired because of the effect they had upon his person. His sincerity is perceptible and compelling to the reader. This engendered trust among early readers such as Muḥammad Fasī, who met weekly with other Muslims to read from the commentary, and among some Christians as well, such as the Reverend Rajab 'Alī at the Allahabad Seminary.

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102 Ibid., 55–57.
103 Ibid., 99.

Some cursory observations provide a background for examining the commentary. Part 3 reads like a work of *adab*. As Gerhard Böwering explains, *adab* is a genre that runs parallel to the study of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), which undergirds exegesis. Though closely related to ethics (*akhlāq*), *adab* is concerned with the inner motivations that direct the outer manifestations of moral action and religious faithfulness. The term is inseparably related to the title of Sayyid Ahmad's journal, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, which was also used by authors, including Ibn ʿArabī, al-Jāḥiẓ and Aḥmad ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) for works of *adab*.[104] The commentary on the Gospel of Matthew reflects the signature combination of spiritual and social guidance characteristic of this genre. This is most clearly discernible in Sayyid Ahmad's reading of Jesus's 'Sermon on the Mount', as will be seen below, where he explains the need for both internal and external faithfulness by which a disciple must be transformed from the inside out. *Adab* governed his reading of the Gospel.

More than any of Sayyid Ahmad's other exegetical writings, Part 3 has a distinctively Sufi tone. The terms applied to Jesus are those that are more frequently used for an exalted spiritual teacher. They are titles reserved for one who has reached the highest stages (*daraja*) of enlightenment. In Sayyid Ahmad's time, among a vast majority of Muslims in South Asia, there was a cultivated spirituality that informed righteous living.[105] Christian Troll touches on this propensity in a reflective footnote where he enquires: 'Could it be that Sayyid Ahmad's tendency towards induction is the mark of his early Sufi influence?'[106] One believes so. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, there is a notable continuity between Sayyid Ahmad's ideas and those of Delhi's Naqshbandī Sufis – his teachers and ancestors. Though elements of this legacy have been observed by other authors, this religio-cultural facet of Sayyid Ahmad's attitude has not been sufficiently emphasized.

This fragmentary study of the Gospel of Matthew offers the first glimpse of what Sayyid Ahmad envisioned for the *Tabyīn* project. It was in a sense a prototype, and a successful one at that. Sayyid Ahmad recognized that, along with the academic value of the product, the exercise itself could stimulate learning across communal boundaries. Muslims and Christians, and Jews as well by Part 2, could interact through the discussion of scriptural interpretations,

104 Gerhard Böwering, 'The *Adab* Literature of Classical Sufism: Anṣārī's Code of Conduct', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 62–65. Arley Loewen, 'Proper Conduct (*Adab*) Is Everything: The *Futuwwat-nāmah-i Sulṭānī* of Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifi', *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 4 (2003): 543–570.

105 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 10–12.

106 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 221.

a practice similar in many ways to the present-day discipline of Scriptural Reasoning. Readers were drawn into Sayyid Ahmad's inductive reflections and challenged to contemplate possible meanings and applications. This was *adab*. As Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, son of Shāh Walī Allāh, famously stated 'All things can be reconciled when there is a will'.[107] To place this statement in context, it was believed that the fundamental differences between Muslim thinkers, whether Sunnīs and Shīʿīs, Muʿtazilīs and Ashʿarīs, or Sufis and jurists, could be overcome through the affirmation of *tawḥīd* as the central message of divine revelation. Sayyid Ahmad extends this ethos into engagement with Christians through the Bible. This was his attitude as he put pen to paper and began his commentary on the Bible. As Sayyid Ahmad explains in the introductory essay to Part 3, 'A brief history of the Christian religion', the differences between early Christians were over the nature of Jesus. These were heated exchanges. But first-century Christians, he observes, regarded theological opponents as 'weaker brothers' rather than as 'unbelievers'.[108] He seeks to rekindle this forbearance among theological opponents in his own milieu.

Part 3 demonstrates a moral vision that seeks to rise above polemic confrontation. Sayyid Ahmad writes in a distinctively different tone from Muir or Kairānawī, for example, or those engaged in the so-called 'Controversy'. They studied the other's tradition in order to undermine its foundations, and to attack the 'enemy' with ammunition from its own armouries. In contrast, Sayyid Ahmad takes seriously the divine command, as Jesus stated: 'Do unto others as you would have it done unto yourself' (Matthew 7:12), and as Muḥammad reiterated: 'Our messenger of God (*saws*) has stated that God Exalted will not show mercy to someone who has not shown mercy to other humans. Mercy is an attribute (ṣifa) of God. The one who chooses to apply this attribute will receive it from God'.[109] This is the impulse found in the initial *Tabyīn* writings. The recognition of this underlying attitude is important because it facilitates the interpretation of certain ambiguous statements that require such comments in order to be properly understood.

Having noted these preliminary matters, I shall now draw attention to two aspects of particular importance for understanding Part 3. The first concerns Christian and Muslim understandings of the nature of Christ. The second addresses the work of Christ. Sayyid Ahmad affirms that Jesus brings salvation (*najāt*), but also recognizes that there are differences between the Muslim and Christian understandings of what *najāt* essentially means, and how it can be accomplished.

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107 Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 16–18.

108 TK, 3: 20.

109 Ibid., 102.

11 The Person of Jesus Christ

Who is Jesus, and how does the answer to this question correlate with Christian and Muslim belief? These are the most central concerns addressed in the commentary on Matthew. The nature of Jesus Christ, as Sayyid Ahmad explains, was intended to defy simple definition. God sought to disturb preconceived notions and to unsettle religious complacency. This is what happened in first-century Palestine, and it is the intended result of Sayyid Ahmad's presentation. Some things are ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) and known only to God, and as Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī (d. 923) observed, the sending down of Jesus is one of these.[110]

Sayyid Ahmad's exploration of the Gospel of Matthew opens a discussion on the Trinitarian view of God, but from an unexpected angle. His extensive presentation on this complex, historically divisive, and yet central doctrine of the Christian Church demonstrates an impressive degree of sensitivity and lateral thinking. He takes particular care in recounting the orthodox Christian view accurately and objectively, even while making it evident that description does not equal ascription.[111] This doctrine is a major source of contention between Muslims and Christians, and Sayyid Ahmad asserts that Christian formulations could benefit from some improvement.

Sayyid Ahmad sets out Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysical account of the nature of Jesus as a recommended alternative. In order to present this view, he quotes two passages at length from *Faṣṣ ʿIsāwī* (contained in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*) as indicative of 'the Muslim view' on the relationship between Jesus and God.[112] As Sayyid Ahmad quotes:

> His birth and form (*ṣūrat*) were such that Christ himself would desire this disagreement. A person would believe by his form that he is a human being, the son of Mary, but later realize that he was man, but not merely man, as he was also *hūwā lā hūwā*.

The nature of Jesus Christ defies simple comprehension, and this was by divine design. His existence was intended to generate a sense of wonder at God's majestic omnipotence. For Ibn ʿArabī, Jesus is *hūwā lā hūwā*, literally 'He not

110 Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 89.

111 Jon Hoover, 'Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity', *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 2009): 57–82; David Thomas, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Abbasid Era', in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 78–98.

112 Ibn ʿArabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 174–184.

He'. For the adept, it is readily known that '*hūwā*' or '*hū*' is the pronoun used for God in the quintessential Sufi exultation '*Allāh hū*' (God, only he), as is meditatively recited (*dhikr*) and sung.

This designation is highly exalted, and it was intended to express the mysterious nature of the person of Jesus. In this same passage in *Faṣṣ ʿĪsāwī*, Ibn ʿArabī likened created existence to an image reflected in a mirror. God, the Creator, is true being (*wujūd*). The created, however, is by definition not true being (*ʿadam al-mutaqābila*), but is like a mirrored reflection. In light of this reflected state, the created is more accurately described by negation. Thus, an antecedent is affixed: *lā*, which means 'no' or 'not'.[113] Ibn ʿArabī's subtle language, *hūwā lā hūwā*, presents Jesus as the reflection or image of God. For Ibn ʿArabī, and the *ʿulamā'* of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, all that can be perceived of God in the created realm is seen only as through a veil. In Jesus, 'true being' is veiled in human flesh.

Christ's nature was complex. As Sayyid Ahmad reflects, the honoured Messiah is 'none other than the Spirit of Allah (*ruḥ Allāh*); and because of this he raised the dead, and generated (*paidā kiya*) birds from clay, so that it is clear that his filiation is from Allah (*nasab Allāh se*)'.[114] He draws from these Qur'anic formulations of Jesus as 'Spirit of Allah' and 'Word of Allah' to convey that the description of Jesus in the Qur'an is consonant with the Biblical designation of Jesus as the 'Son of God'.[115] The terms are congruous, he insists, because they describe that which originated from the Eternal Father.[116] Consequently, Muslims are to revere Jesus as 'Christ, Word, Spirit and Son of God', and Sayyid Ahmad applies these designations interchangeably throughout the study of Matthew. Each of these signifies that Christ was created differently from other humans by divine design.

In effect, this excursion into Ibn ʿArabī's ontology illustrates that there was greater commonality between Christians and Muslims on the nature of Jesus than many assumed. The language is familiar to those initiated into the Pauline epistles. The selected portion resonates with passages of the New Testament where Jesus is described as 'the image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15).

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113 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 79–95.

114 TK, 3: 2.

115 Wālī Allāh, *Al-fawz al-kabīr*, 28–29. Shāh Walī Allāh affirmed the Biblical use of the title 'Son of God' as a valid metaphor. He applied this to Israel (*bani-Isrā'īl*), Ezra and Jesus. He did not take issue with the term, but rather with its exclusive appropriation for Jesus as 'the only son', for this would prevent salvific mercy from being universally accessible and detract from the prophetic role of Muḥammad.

116 TK, 3: 2.

'For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:15). There are similarities in language and concept, the enduring echoes of conversations long passed. Sayyid Ahmad seems to realize, as others had before, that 'Muslims and Christians occupy similar, if not identical worlds'.[117] To his credit, Sayyid Ahmad's presentation does not collapse the differences between Muslim and Christian views of Jesus, but rather he opens the way for a broader perspective by acknowledging this inherent complexity. He creates a space for dialogue where before there was room only for debate.

As noted earlier, in Sayyid Ahmad's account of the 'Unity of Being', God is described as present and indwelling (*ḥulūl*) all of creation, but without fusion (*ittiḥad*).[118] These two terms defy simple translation, but their correct usage, according to Sayyid Ahmad's understanding, is vital for addressing the Christian doctrine of Incarnation.[119] When Ibn ʿArabī stated that the 'creature is Allah', as Sayyid Ahmad explains, he meant that the divine is immanent in creation, even while the divine essence (*dhāt*) remains utterly transcendent. In the words of Shāh Walī Allāh, 'These [emanations] are like a painted portrait in relation to the one of whom it was drawn, or the written form to the word spoken'.[120] Thus, in Sayyid Ahmad's conception, Jesus was the embodiment (*mujassām*) of the synonymous 'Word, Son, and Spirit of God'. This usage closely parallels that found in John 1:14: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Sayyid Ahmad applied this same metaphor many years later in *Tafsīr* to explain Muḥammad's reception of the Qur'an, whereby again the word (*kalām*) that proceeds from God became embodied (*vo mujassām cīz hotā hai*) in utterances that were stated and later recorded.[121] In this formulation, Jesus embodied the attribute of the 'Word of God'. He embodied this attribute, but the indwelling (*ḥulūl*) was such that the divine never subsumed (*ittiḥad*) or replaced the human person. He embodied this attribute without collapsing the distinct identities of either God (described as Eternal Father, Eternal Son, and Eternal Holy Spirit) or that of the man Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

Ibn ʿArabī's formula attributed a unique status to Jesus without compromising divine unicity, which is the utter otherness of God. According to Sayyid Ahmad's reading, Ibn ʿArabī offered a nuanced correction to Christian

117 Bennett, *In Search of Muhammad*, 88.

118 Edwin E. Calverley and James W. Pollock, eds. *Nature, Man, and God in Medieval Islam*, Part 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 761.

119 Louis Massignon and Georges C. Anawati, 'Ḥulūl', in *EI²*; Reynold Nicholson and Georges C. Anawati 'Ittiḥad', in *EI²*.

120 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xxii.

121 TQ, 3: 204.

theologians through apophatic theology, the *via negativa*.[122] The resulting account was that Jesus is 'He [God] not He [God]'. This formula maintained the paradox – as per divine design – of Jesus's mysterious nature, and yet did not compromise the central Muslim doctrine of *tawḥīd*. The Chalcedonian formula, however, which is accepted in orthodox Christianity, describes Jesus Christ as 'fully man and fully God', and no degree of semiotic acrobatics can smooth over the exalted status granted to Jesus in the Christian faith tradition. Still, one can see how encounters with Unitarian and Broad Church Christians in India made it evidently clear to Sayyid Ahmad that there was a diversity of views in the Christian tradition regarding core doctrines such as the Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement. Sayyid Ahmad successfully appeals to Ibn ʿArabī, a Muslim source regarded as highly authoritative in this context, to underscore that the problem of articulating Jesus's nature is a conundrum shared by Christians and Muslims alike. This is a complex revelatory issue, and its correct formulation is a shared theological problem.

Sayyid Ahmad did not accept the Trinitarian formulation as the best way to conceptualize Jesus's unique nature, but his willingness to ponder this issue provides an entryway for reverent and studious dialogue. It is an example of what Marianne Moyaert has termed a 'vulnerable theology', because here again we see a willingness to explore the views of another tradition and to contemplate the problems and potentialities of reflection.[123] In engaging the nature of Jesus Christ from the Muslim framework of divine attributes, Sayyid Ahmad is applying a mechanism that is central to Islamic theology to discuss unity within plurality, or the inner unicity of the divine manifest in pluriform creation. Historically, Christians and Muslims have agreed that there is one God who is beyond creation, and that all of creation comes from this one God. Whether described in terms of person (Greek *prosopon*, literally face) or attribute (*ṣifa*), the respective interpreter immediately recognizes the deficiency of language to fully account for this exalted mystery. Still, it is amazing to see how Sayyid Ahmad's approach turns the contentious question of Jesus's nature from an intransigent endpoint to a dialogical starting point. This again is a characteristic example of his purpose in the commentary, namely to stimulate a shared sense of mission in understanding and responding to divine revelation.

122 The *via negativa* thrived Andalusian mysticism, both Christian and Muslim. It was carried forward to India, as we see here, but also to Western Europe and the Americas through the writings of St John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila. For greater detail see Miguel Asín Palacios, *El Islam Christianizado: estudio del 'sufismo' a través de las obras de Abenarabi de Murcia* (Madrid: Editorial Plutarco, 1930).

123 Moyaert, *Response to the Religious Other*, 157–188.

Sayyid Ahmad further explores the nature of Jesus by drawing specific attention to the conflicting views held among the first generations of Christians.[124] Drawing from Johann von Mosheim's exhaustive *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, he presents an encyclopaedic list of competing descriptions, which clearly makes the point.[125] There were Collyridians and Damianists, Tritheists and Nazarenes and many more, each convinced of their respective view. From among these, Trinitarians, as Sayyid Ahmad explains, believed that Jesus had both a divine and a human nature. As stated in the Athanasian Creed, a primary church document on the Trinity, 'We worship one God in the Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither blending the persons nor dividing the essence'.[126] Although the Muslim framework of attributes is based on a different logic from Christian metaphysics, this exercise brings out the commonality of 'embodiment', which one uses to avoid saying Incarnation. Sayyid Ahmad has, perhaps even inadvertently, compared two of the most central events of revelation in the Christian and Muslim traditions in analogous terms, whereby the 'word of God', as *logos* and *kalām*, takes form and becomes embodied (*mujassām*) as Jesus and the Qur'an, respectively. It would be more than a hundred years before Christian theologians like Kenneth Cragg would set out a similar idea, calling for the Qur'an to be compared not with the Bible, but rather with Jesus, who is the 'Word made flesh'.

Deciphering the meaning of and need for 'Person' (*prosopon*) in Trinitarian theology proves to be a task beyond Sayyid Ahmad's reach, despite his best intentions. The insurmountable difficulty has to do with the issue of generation (*paidah*) and the nuanced conceptual borderlands between the Creator and creation. The Holy Spirit, in Sayyid Ahmad's presentation of Christian belief, is synonymous with the divine attribute (*ṣifā al-fi'l*) action of existentiation (*ījād*). This proceeds from Allāh, who is the divine essence and is called Father, and also from the divine attribute called Eternal Son.[127] These attributes were implicit in the original essence, but only became explicit within creation, that is the contingent cosmos. Muslims, he explains, differ because we insist that the Father's essence is unique. Muslims reject the belief that there is a shared unity of essence between Father and Son.

This is a carefully worded exposition. Sayyid Ahmad's account displays considerable theological acumen and familiarity with the Christian tradition. He

124 TK, 3: 2–15.

125 Johann Lorenz von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, ancient and modern … much corrected, enlarged and improved, from the primary authorities*, trans. James Murdock (New Haven: A.H. Maltby, 1832).

126 John Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 91–99.

127 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 212.

correctly recognizes that Chalcedonian Christians understand that the three *prosopa* are one in essence (Greek *ousia*, Arabic *dhāt*). He also applies an Aristotelian framework of causality to explain how the Triune God generated creation. In his understanding of Christian belief, Father and Son (two of the three *prosopa*) are eternal causes, and the Holy Spirit is the eternal effect. The reason given for this is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son. This explains how, for example, Jesus Christ gave life to Lazarus and to a clay bird, as recounted in the New Testament and the Qurʾan, respectively. He gave life through the Holy Spirit because 'as the Spirit of Allāh comes into Christ, so to the Spirit of Christ issues into those who believe upon him'.[128] In this light, God is the Eternal Father, 'true existence' (*wujūd*), and is utterly transcendent and singularly unique. Divine attributes, which are manifest in creation, are in actuality reflections of the transcendent divine essence. Thus, it is logically coherent to say that God is Jesus, or in Jesus, but not to say that Jesus is God.

Despite the tangible difficulty in crossing language and conceptual frameworks, Sayyid Ahmad clearly grasps the sense that 'begetting' (*paidah*), in Christian thought, did not result in (to use Miroslav Volf's terms) 'an offspring spatially distinct or in any way independent from God, a godlike being or another god'.[129] 'Begetting' is a metaphor used to express eternal generation, or 'the idea that the Word', again Volf, 'which was from eternity with God, is neither a creature nor some sort of lesser divinity, but is the very uncreated God'.[130] In other words, as Augustine explained, 'God the Father begot God the Son without time, and made Him of a Virgin in time'.[131] The precise point of the semantic shift was to differentiate between the meaning of generation and that of creation, and so to insist that the Eternal Word, which was used interchangeably with Eternal Son, was not a being next to God, but rather referred only to the singular and indivisible divine essence.

Despite such careful lexicology, Sayyid Ahmad remains unconvinced by the Trinitarian formulation. In his estimation, if the Eternal Son proceeded from the Eternal Father – no matter how – then that which proceeded must be other than the original cause. One reason for this may have to do with the separate but related doctrine of Incarnation. The confusion can be seen in the way Sayyid Ahmad interchangeably applies the term Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*) to Spirit of Allāh (*rūḥ Allāh*), a title attributed to Jesus in the Qurʾan. Despite

128 TK, 3: 12.

129 Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 133.

130 Ibid.

131 Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 90, Part 2, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Sermons, Part III (51–94) on the New Testament, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 452.

their shared phonemes, these two terms have radically different meanings.[132] The term 'begotten' in the Trinity refers to the Eternal Son, who is apart from the created world. The confusion stems from the subsequent use of the term 'begotten' in reference to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who existed in the created world as a human being. Trinitarian metalanguage did not conflate the man Jesus and the Eternal Son of God. The doctrine was carefully prepared to defend against many other representations of the nature of Jesus and against those opposed not only to the divinity of Jesus, but also to his humanity. In Christian theology, the Eternal Son is 'begotten not created', as stated in the creed, and a necessary distinction is sustained between the three 'faces' (*prosopon*): Eternal Father, Eternal Son and Eternal Holy Spirit. Christian orthodoxy required that the nuanced difference between God and Jesus be sustained in the formulation. Thus, one understands the tension experienced by Sayyid Ahmad in seeking to reconcile the Biblical descriptions of Jesus. He accepts Jesus as the 'image of God', the 'Son of God', and what I have translated as 'He not He' (*hūwā lā hūwā*), but he stops short of affirming the Trinitarian view of Jesus as 'fully man and fully God'. He concludes that this formulation casts an unnecessary shadow upon the clear meaning of monotheistic belief, and he cannot see how the benefits to outweigh the costs of this paradoxical formulation of Christ's mysterious nature.[133]

In his exploration of the person of Jesus Christ, Sayyid Ahmad draws from the wealth of Muslim theology to interpret the interplay between the Creator and creation through the logic of divine attributes. It is an impressive undertaking. His approach is somewhat similar to that taken by Arabic-speaking Christians in the early Abbasid era, an effort that unfortunately yielded the same basic result. As David Thomas explains, '[The concept of attribute] denoted something which could formally be both a reality in itself and uniform with the being it qualified'.[134] This at least seems to translate far better than 'bodies' (*ajsām*), as was rendered by some Muʿtazilīs. But, like the claims of these earlier Arab Christians, Sayyid Ahmad's exploration serves mainly to underscore the complicated, and nearly algebraic nature of the Trinitarian doctrine. Nevertheless, his diligence is indicative of a personal quest to comprehend and articulate a description of how the Creator interacts within creation, or more precisely, how the divine will becomes operative in the manifest

132 TK, 3: 2–15.

133 Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Hamza Yusuf also have grappled with Trinitarian monotheism and similarly concluded that it does not contravene the bounds of monotheism. See Nasr, *Study Quran*, 316–317.

134 Thomas, 'Doctrine', 95.

world. He is compelled by faith to uphold the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the utter otherness of the divine essence, and by logic to affirm that ultimately there can be only one initial cause. But questions lingered. How can the divine essence be at work in creation and yet remain utterly apart? This was a question of lasting concern for Sayyid Ahmad, and his engagement with Trinitarian thought in *Tabyīn* presents an early exploration of this conundrum.

In assessing the development of his ideas, it is noteworthy that he differentiated between Trinitarians and those guilty of the sin of association (*shirk*). He did not regard orthodox Christians as having gone outside monotheistic belief,[135] but he admonished them to distinguish between honouring Jesus and offering him the adoration that is reserved for God alone. Though a thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that Sayyid Ahmad raises a valid concern. In light of the history of doctrinal controversy mentioned above, it is not surprising to see the precision reflected in the Christian creeds. As James Dunn has cogently described, there are several words for 'worship' in the New Testament. They variously denote praise, appreciation, devotion and thankfulness There is a key term, however, to describe the type of worship that is reserved solely for God. Often rendered as 'adoration', the Greek word *latreuein* carries the same reservation that was of concern to Sayyid Ahmad Khan. '[The] writers of the New Testament', Dunn explains, 'have only worship of God in view as desirable and commendable. In this they are faithful to the teaching of their scriptures'.[136] In other words, nowhere in the New Testament is there talk of offering to Jesus the 'cultic' adoration reserved for God alone; rather it is a matter of giving thanks to God through Christ, or for what Christ has done, or in the name of Christ. Nevertheless, as Richard Bauckham has convincingly argued, 'The intention of New Testament Christology, throughout the texts, is to include Jesus in the unique, divine identity as Jewish monotheism understood it'.[137]

I suspect that many Christians fail to comprehend these nuanced distinctions, and this is precisely Sayyid Ahmad's complaint. He claims that the Trinitarian

135 TK, 3: 8.

136 For a thorough examination of Christian views on this subject, see James D.G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), esp. 55.

137 Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 26. For a highly cogent account of Jesus worship within Jewish monotheism, see Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis, 'The Worship of Divine Humanity as God's Image and the Worship of Jesus', in Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis, eds, *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 112–128.

formulation is overly technical and open to confusion, arguing that the core of the Gospel, which is confirmed by 'the light given to Muḥammad', 'is that worship is for God alone (*tawḥīd-i ʿibādah*)'. Elsewhere, he directs similar concern towards Muslims who come close to crossing the same threshold between veneration and worship of Muḥammad or of the Sufi saints. Though claiming to stop short of deification, the widely held beliefs and practices associated with the *nūr-i Muḥammadiyya* approach this area and have roused the ire of many reformers. Nevertheless, as will be discussed further when we consider Sayyid Ahmad's soteriology in Chapter 5, salvation is accomplished through simple belief in the One God, and it is only by the rejection of monotheistic belief (*kufr-i muṭlaq*) that one is condemned for unbelief.[138] Sayyid Ahmad disagrees with the Trinitarian formula, but he does not exclude its adherents from the monotheistic fold. Christians accept by faith the unique identity of Christ as 'Word made flesh'. This proposition is not easily rationalized. As we shall consider below, this experience is similar in some degree to the challenge Muslims have faced in articulating the nature of the Qur'an as 'Word made book'.[139]

12 The Words and the Text

As noted above, a pronounced Sufi influence is strongly evident in Sayyid Ahmad's description of the symbiotic relationship between the text and the true disciple (*murīd*). One's awareness of being a disciple, he explains, becomes manifest through the encounter with Christ's spirit through the words recorded in the text. Disciples (*ḥawarīn*) are empowered through the indwelling of Christ's spirit, and this becomes evident in their righteous deeds (*Masiḥ ki rūh-i quds se mamūr ho kar, apne kām par mashghūl huʾe*).[140] The recorded words contain spiritual vitality:

138 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad* Khan, 213.

139 Although Sayyid Ahmad does not directly compare the Qurʾān to Jesus, the link can be inferred, and there is substantial historical precedent indicating the link in these ideas such as that provided by al-Ṭabarī. 'The confusion of opinion about the Qurʾān in the minds of many people is such that it has seemed good to them and attractive to their intellects that it is not created … Even though the Qurʾān itself speaks about God's creative power, sets forth its proof and decisively confutes all difference of opinion about it, these people talk just like the Christians when they claim that Jesus the son of Mary was not created, because he was the word of God'. Al-Ṭabarī. *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 32: *The History of the Abbāsid Caliphate*, trans. Clifford Edmund Bosworth (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 206–207.

140 TK, 3: 4.

> The words come off the page and into the heart as when they were spoken by Ḥaḍhrat Masīḥ (Honoured Messiah). The words are laden with the same spiritual light as when spoken by Christ and are as effective when read today as they were when first spoken.[141]

Access to 'spiritual light' remains available to the reader across space and time. The effect of the words spoken by Christ, he explains, is the same today as when they were first spoken. True disciples, past and present, are revealed by their response to the spirit's words.[142]

Religious affiliation does not guarantee this transformative experience. Spiritual faithfulness, or the grace of seeing the 'light', is not determined by heritage or designated religious boundaries. Sayyid Ahmad contrasts, for example, his personal experience as a Muslim with that of the rationalist Christian scholar Bruno Bauer. His attitude towards scripture, Sayyid Ahmad explained, makes it evident that Bauer is obviously 'devoid of the Holy Spirit'.[143] The spiritual encounter has nothing to do with one's being a Christian or a Muslim; rather it is a matter of belief and of the heart. The spirit is for all who believe in the One God and who have a 'good heart'.[144] Those who have a heart willing to believe, he explains, can share an experience similar to his own: 'these words help me in the way the Holy Spirit helped Jesus (*mu'ayyad bi-l-rūḥ al-quds*)'. For Sayyid Ahmad, the experience of the sustained indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not bound by religion, but rather is determined by response in the 'inner heart'.

This spiritual approach, that is, reading with the eyes of the heart, offers important insight into the way in which Sayyid Ahmad understands that religious knowledge and authority are transmitted. For example, he regards the expansive success of the 'people of God' as an impartation of this 'spiritual light'. He writes:

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141 Ibid., 99.

142 The language in this section draws attention to a high degree of overlap between the Christian and Muslim mystical traditions. Consider this passage by St Clare, as one of many possible examples, and note the similarity in metaphor and imagery: 'Place your mind before the mirror of eternity. Place your soul in the brilliance of glory. Place your heart in the figure of the divine substance, and transform your whole being into the image of the Godhead Itself through contemplation. So that you too may feel what His friends fell as they taste the hidden sweetness which God Himself has reserved from the beginning for those who love Him'. http://www.slr-ofs.org/st-clares-letters-to-st-agnes-of-prague.html, accessed 8 May 2021.

143 TK, 3: 25.

144 Ibid., 25.

> The disciples of Ḥaḍhrat Masiḥ (*as*) and the companions of our *janāb*, the Prophet of God (*saws*), and the very great friends of God (*auliyā' Allāh*) in our religion … were indwelt with the light of which Jesus (*as*) has said: Let your light shine before others in such a way that they see your good works and thank your Father in Heaven. Yes, to preach is very easy, but to speak and be like St Paul is extremely difficult.[145]

The 'spiritual light', imparted by the Holy Spirit and present in the text, was not limited to the twelve disciples (*ḥawarīn*), or to a *rasūl* (apostle) like Peter, but was also available to 'St Paul', whom Sayyid Ahmad mentions three times in Part 3.[146] The person of Paul is a subject of importance, and we shall return to it in Chapter 5. This also includes other initiates (*murīd*), such as the three thousand who believed at Pentecost after Jesus's ascension, as recounted in Acts 2:1–4. In Sayyid Ahmad's understanding, the New Testament view is that anyone who sincerely places faith in Jesus Christ becomes indwelt by the Holy Spirit and is empowered with divine knowledge and authority. In other words, he has entered 'the Kingdom of God'.

There is also an important connection to be made here in Sayyid Ahmad's thinking between the role of the 'Spirit' and the process of revelation. Later in *Tafsīr*, Sayyid Ahmad describes this 'spiritual light' as the manifestation of divine attributes. The same attributes that were present in the recipients of prophetic revelation are also present in all believers. The difference is one of degree. The light is available to all who believe, like the followers of Jesus mentioned above; and it was by this same light that the Prophet of Islam received revelation.[147] Encounters with the light, he explains, originate in the Spirit-filled Word (*kalām*). These divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), God's Word and Spirit, become more fulsome and refined (*taraqqī*) through personal development. We shall return to this in the next chapter to more fully consider the implications of Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of revelation.

It is also vital to note that Sayyid Ahmad's account of the process of spiritual progress is highly democratic. He includes contemporary Muslim and Christian 'disciples' alongside the revered Companions of the Prophet and the Sufi saints (*auliyā*). This stands in stark contrast to the elitist hierarchy that is characteristic of Persianate Sufism, where spiritual lineage is indicative of elevated power and authority. The work of Jesus was to prepare disciples to carry forward the spiritual revolution (*ruḥānī inqelāb*) whereby all have access through faith to

145 Ibid., 108.
146 Ibid.3, 17.
147 TQ, 1: 23–26.

this same spiritual light. Descent from noble ancestors does not guarantee acceptance in the 'Kingdom of God'. Revelation proceeds through the 'Spirit of Allah', also known as the attribute action of existentiation (*ījād*). This attribute is manifest to different degrees in all who exist, not just in prophets. It becomes activated by belief, and is cultivated through rigorous devotion.

13 The Counsels of Jesus

Exposition of Jesus's counsels (*naṣīhat*) is at the heart of Sayyid Ahmad's commentary on Matthew. In his view, the very purpose of Jesus's ministry was to provide transformative spiritual light through teaching. Judaism, our author claims, had become a hollow religion, devoid of spiritual guidance, and thus it was necessary that one 'born of the Spirit' should come to guide the people back to the way.[148] Healing the sick, casting out demons and remaining faithful even unto death, though important, serve to frame Jesus's primary work which was to provide spiritual guidance.

Although the terms 'command' (*ḥukm*), 'preaching' (*waʿẓ*), and 'law giving' (*sharīʿa*) are sometimes used to describe Jesus's teachings in the Gospel of Matthew, it is noteworthy that Sayyid Ahmad consistently preferred the term 'counsel' (*nasīhat*). Jesus gave wise counsel not forceful commands. This is also the term uses to describe the tone of God's fatherly counsel to Adam and Even in the garden in Genesis 3. The need of Jesus's day, he notes, was not for greater clarity on the legal bounds of *sharīʿa*, but rather for a spiritual revival that would enable faithful obedience to the directives in hand. Such conditions, in Sayyid Ahmad's assessment, were not unlike those in his generation. Overemphasis on lineage and formulaic ritualism had drained people of spiritual vitality. Adherence to Jesus's counsel could bring them back on track. The term 'counsel' connotes wise advice; it is not forceful or combative, and this again is reminiscent of Sayyid Ahmad's prescription that Muslims and Christians should interact without 'the darkness of argumentation', as he seeks to demonstrate in this commentary.[149]

The search for 'pure Islam' (*thet*) required spiritual renewal, and Jesus's counsels could help. These 'counsels become embedded in the heart', he explains, 'so that transformation comes about in the hearer'. Correct moral behaviour is insufficient. Right action, he writes, must proceed from a 'heart ethic', or an internal righteousness. The external (*ẓāhirī*) is an outflow of the

148 TK, 3: 2.
149 Ibid., 99.

internal (*bāṭinī*). It is not enough to appear honourable and morally upright. Good deeds performed for show, or from unrighteous motivations, he insists, are ultimately displeasing to God. Again, this is the language of *adab*; it is a call for right actions, relations and intentions. Jesus, the leader (*sardār*) of the legislative prophets (*rusul*), brings salvation through counsel, as attested by Muḥammad, the final legislative prophet.

The commentary crescendos and concludes suddenly with what Sayyid Ahmad describes as the quintessence of Christ's counsel: to overcome evil with good. The command to return evil with 'all forms of good' is described as the greatest possible human quality. Once imbued with the Holy Spirit, Muslims can respond to discrimination and oppression in a manner that will please God and transform the enemy into a friend. Evil must be overcome by good. This is the truest demonstration of faithfulness to Christ. 'Those who have a spiritual desire to please God, and to do things His way become strengthened; [they] experience joy and contentment even in suffering'.[150] This is the way forward, and the only way to communal harmony. As further stated in his comment on Matthew 5:10:

> What quality could be greater than a person's goodness who, whilst doing good, is persecuted for this action? Without doubt, the Kingdom of God, that is the mercy and grace that God has promised through the prophets, will be theirs alone.[151]

It is those who demonstrate forgiveness by returning evil with good who evidence the 'light of Christ, are in the Kingdom of God, see God, and inherit the earth'. These are the 'children of God', those described by Imam al-Ghazālī as those 'accepted by God' and who will certainly enter Paradise. One is not 'accepted by God' through adherence to a particular creed, or through ritual, but by internal transformation that will result even in the repaying of evil with good. 'If the light of the Spirit of God (*ruḥ Allāh*) is in you, then forgive, and repay wrong with good'. The commentary closes with a dramatic prediction: 'If we do not implement this, we are sinking in a boat of misfortune, set to drown in a sea of sin'.[152]

Part 3 concludes with a call for Christ's counsels to be immediately implemented. If love of the enemy were recognized as the central theme in Jesus's message, and affirmed as his crowning and un-abrogatable salvific work, it

150 Ibid., 105.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid., 129.

would reverse the tide of enmity between Muslims and Christians in British India. He writes:

> In accordance with this counsel we must love even our enemies and wish them continuously well, make just decisions in their affairs, deal with them generously, and abstain from taking revenge. We must bring them benefit in every way.[153]

As our author explains, because God's word is never abrogated, this command remains applicable today to both Muslims and Christians. Those who respond to the 'light' in Christ's counsel will repent and be enabled to forgive and love others, even their enemy. This is the mark of inner baptism.[154]

In the culminating conclusion of Part 3, Sayyid Ahmad seamlessly blends Christian and Muslim concepts with dramatic effect in a display of tremendous agility, where he simultaneously addresses a Christian and Muslim audience. He intermingles Christian filial terms, Jesus as Son, God as Father, with Sufi attributive imagery, such as creation, work and light. In Sayyid Ahmad's words:

> Your Father lets his sun shine on all, friend and foe, and allows his rain to fall on all. If you too, in the same way, bestow your generosity and mercifulness on all, then you will acquire a ray from this divine attribute which is in God, and for this reason you will be God's children, that is God's beloved ones.[155]

The blending is purposeful. He is calling both audiences to immediate repentance. The tone and theme are intended to prick the conscience of the reader and to rouse resolve. The counsel of Christ must be urgently applied, Muslims first – himself and his own community – but Christians as well. 'If one loves and cherishes the enemy then the perfection that is in your Father – a ray (the splendour) of this perfection – may come forward in you too'. In this light, Part 3 is the account of a Muslim who takes the Biblical account of Jesus's counsels with the seriousness of scripture. Clearly, he also hopes that the counsel to

153 Ibid.

154 Use of the term 'baptismal' here reflects the idea of profound transformation inherent in the Arabic root (*ṣ-b-gh*), for dyeing cloth, from which stems the Urdu word for Christian baptism (*iṣṭebāgh*). Discussion of this term is found in TQ, 2: 67–68.

155 TK, 3: 128.

forgive, and to overcome evil with good, would bring forth love (*muḥabbhat*) in the polarized setting of post-1857 India.

In Sayyid Ahmad's reading, Jesus brought salvation in the same way as other prophets: that is, by calling for baptismal repentance. The metaphor of baptism, as it can be seen even later in *Tafsīr*, holds a profound significance for him. Though the ritual of water baptism, he explains, is most clearly seen in the ministries of John and Jesus, its symbolism is consistent with the proclamation of all the prophets. Transformative repentance, whether in the Psalms, the Gospel or the Qur'an, is the 'true baptism (*iṣṭebāgh*) of Allah'.

Sayyid Ahmad also clarifies, however, that baptism was never intended to be merely an external (*ẓāhir*) ritual of initiation. Baptism was a symbol of heart-felt inner (*bāṭin*) repentance. Rituals, he explains, are merely the outer manifestation of internal submission to God. 'Because of sins and the pollution of the world, the person is counted among the [spiritually] dead; he discards this terrible death and enters into spiritual life when he receives baptism (*iṣṭebāgh*)'.[156] As he writes in *Tafsīr*, '[Our life] takes its colour from God, and who gives a better colour than God? It is He whom we worship'.[157] A person who repents and turns to God becomes spiritually altered, like a cloth dyed with the colour of God's righteousness. Christian missionaries called Muslims to receive baptism and 'become Christians or Jews', but Christian baptism, Sayyid Ahmad explains, had become an identity marker to delineate communal boundaries for inclusion and exclusion. It is quite possible that Sayyid Ahmad had been confronted by such an invitation. If indeed he 'acknowledged a belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world' as recounted by Reverend Judd, such statements would have aroused the missionary's hope that Sayyid Ahmad was interested in conversion.[158] But, as Sayyid Ahmad concludes, 'Once tradition has become mere ritual, a mere means of identification, then it is of no value before God'.[159] In this usage of the word 'baptism', Sayyid Ahmad returns to what is possibly the earliest meaning of the term, that of colouring, or immersing cloth in dye. He differentiates between the inner change that evidences salvation and the formal ritual that initiates a believer into the Christian religion. If Christian denominations, like the Protestants and Catholics, could not agree on the meaning and function of baptism, he seems to say, it is not reasonable to expect Muslims to follow this practice. The

156 TQ, 1: 150–151. In TQ, 2: 67–68, in exposition of Q 3:5–6, Sayyid Ahmad describes sin a result of personal action, but also as an inherited contamination (*marūsī* from *wāris*).

157 The passage is cited as Q 2:135–138 in *Tabyīn*, but commented on in *Tafsīr* in the section concerning Q 2:132.

158 Guenther, 'Christian Responses', 74.

159 TK, 3: 77.

labels and forms are not as important as belief. One should believe, repent and live transformed.

In statements such as these, Sayyid Ahmad tests the boundary lines of Muslim faith in his reading of Matthew. He refers to Jesus not only as Word and Spirit of God, but also as Son of God. Furthermore, in Part 1 he deliberately refers to Jesus as the 'leader (*sardār*) of the prophets (*rusul*)', and as sent by God to save (*najāt*) humanity from sin. These are but a few examples of statements that would certainly have aggravated some of his co-religionists. One particularly offended reader named Abdul Baqī, offered to pay for Sayyid Ahmad to visit Medina so that he would return to his senses. Close associates, however, like Ḥālī and Sahāranpurī, and later readers such Muda Ismail and Bashir Dar, do not regard Sayyid Ahmad as having gone beyond the pale of Islam. Boundaries were tested and concepts explored, but many concur with Ismail's assessment that Sayyid Ahmad did not actually step 'outside the views of normative Islam'.[160]

In conclusion, the depth and quality of engagement with these first five chapters of the Gospel of Matthew is impressive. It has been noted in previous research that Ram Mohan Roy's *The Precepts of Jesus* (1820) may have seeded the idea for this venture. Whether this is the case or not, Sayyid Ahmad's approach differs considerably from that of his sagacious precursor. In *The Precepts*, Roy transcribed only the teachings of Jesus. He excised all of the narrative portions and miraculous accounts. Roy's religious journey was complex and cannot be taken up here for lack of space, but he became a leader of the Unitarian [Christian] movement in India and was a person of great influence. Despite his change of religious affiliation, from Hindu to Unitarian, Roy presented Jesus as a wise teacher of ethical guidance. He sought to demonstrate through a historical-critical study of the New Testament that salvation came through the teaching of Jesus and not by vicarious atonement. According to Roy's reading, Jesus was not divine; and yet neither was he a mere man; rather he was a being with special powers and a status 'superior even to the angels in heaven'.[161] The parallels to Sayyid Ahmad's ideas are uncanny. Though often described as a 'Unitarian' (*muwaḥḥid*), Sayyid Ahmad held firmly to Muslim identity.[162] Unlike Roy, his commentary does not excise the narrative portions,

160 Abd Rahman, 'Interpretation of the Birth of Jesus', 31.

161 Rammohun Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness* (New York: B. Bates, 1826), 160, 295. See also his *Tuḥfat al-muwaḥḥidīn* (Azimanad-Patna: s.p., 1804), which criticized the irrationality of the local practice of religion and called for a unification through monotheistic faith and a universal moral code.

162 See for example the description of Sayyid Ahmad by the Reverend Rājab 'Alī, editor of *Nūr Afshān*, published in that same periodical in Article 4 (4 May 1882): 140–141.

though this might be in response to the stern denunciations levied against Roy's book by mainline Christians. Ultimately, if Sayyid Ahmad's position were that only the counsels of Jesus were of value, he would not have gone much beyond his Indian predecessor. But Sayyid Ahmad's writings in Part 3 reveal an engagement with the text and the person of Jesus that is far more intimate than Roy's. Roy distilled ethical propositions, Sayyid Ahmad speaks of a teacher-disciple relationship that brought about inner change, a spiritual baptism that enabled the outworking of such ethics.

Part 3 recounts Sayyid Ahmad's personal study of the Gospel of Matthew, which was an initial step in his larger study of the Bible in light of the revelation granted to Muḥammad. The intermingling of passages from the Qurʾan, the Hadith and the Bible illustrates a quest to understand and reconcile the manifold voices of revelation. The content demonstrates that Sayyid Ahmad had already set about 'elucidating the word' before composing the systematic rationale seen in the discourses of Part 1. Let us now consider a selection from *Tafsīr*, Sayyid Ahmad's final and most extensive exegetical writings.

14 *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*

Tafsīr al-Qurʾān provides a final source for ascertaining from his exegetical writings Sayyid Ahmad's view of prophetic revelation and the inter-relation of the Bible and Qurʾan.[163] In *Taḥrīr*, which he envisioned as a prolegomenon to *Tafsīr*, Sayyid Ahmad lists the hermeneutical principles applied in the commentary, restating his assessment of the Biblical text and reiterating his conviction that the present Bible cannot be regarded as textually corrupt (*taḥrīf-i lafẓī*). He also clarifies that he used these scriptures as an interpretative source for his study of the Qurʾan. Biblical references are interspersed throughout *Tafsīr*, but we shall consider one particular section from *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* (Q 3), which contains the longest contiguous exposition. It extends for over forty pages, and it is sufficient for our present purposes. A reading of this portion introduces Sayyid Ahmad's study of the Qurʾan, and prepares the way for discussion in the next chapter concerning his view of revelation.

The resounding theme in *Tafsīr* is the reconciliation of reason and revelation. To situate Sayyid Ahmad's critical reading, it is necessary to recall the cosmological framework in which he operated. For him, divine unicity (*tawḥīd*) was

163 Work on the first volume commenced in 1877 and it was published in 1880. Five subsequent volumes were completed before his death in 1895, and the final one, which goes through *Sūrat Ṭā Hā* (Q 20), was published posthumously in 1904.

assured by the essential separation between the Creator and creation.[164] God's essence (*dhāt*) is utterly transcendent. Thus, the divine can only be perceived within creation. Citing the Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 1198), Sayyid Ahmad describes God as the first cause. God was the prime mover, and all else proceeds from there, including the divine attributes present in creation. The universe is an organic whole, where there is a 'Sympathy' (to use Fazlur Rahman's term) in which all the parts 'behave as members of a single organism'.[165] The divine attributes of speech (*kalām*) and will (*irāda*), for example, become actuated in creation through the natural processes of cause and effect. Sayyid Ahmad shares the 'determinism of the *falsafa*', as Christian Troll has argued, and he ascribes to a uniform law of nature that was both descriptive and normative in character.[166] The logic of Sayyid Ahmad's position is as follows: If God were to extend into the created order, God's divine singularity (*tawḥīd*) would be compromised by the melding of the Creator and the created. Thus, as delineated in the commentary on Genesis in *Tabyīn* Part 1, any scriptural pericope that circumvents plain reason must be interpreted figuratively. As Sayyid Ahmad unequivocally clarifies, 'I apply the law of nature to *kitāb* [scripture] and Sunna'.[167] The episodes of Jesus's life referred to in *Tafsīr* were read accordingly.

Before discussing these episodes, some introductory points need to be made regarding Sayyid Ahmad's use of Hadith, or the rather lack, in his commentary on the Qur'an. In the absence of a definitive study on *Tafsīr*, it is important to introduce some aspects of his approach. Abdullah Saeed has observed that 'His principles of interpretation make no mention of Sunna, focusing instead on the use of philological and rational principles'.[168] A closer description of Sayyid Ahmad's approach, however, requires a careful delineation to be noted between his understanding of Hadith and Sunna. In his commentary, Sayyid Ahmad cites Hadith along with discussions of it by a cast of exegetes. He does not, however, appeal to Hadith as conclusive evidence in determining interpretation. The reason for this is that he does not accept the veracity of the overwhelming majority of Hadith reports (*khabar*). According to his research, perhaps only four such reports qualify as Prophetic ordinances (*dar ḥukm marfūʿ*), or what some would regard as Sunna.[169]

The reason Saeed gives for Sayyid Ahmad's omission of Sunna also requires consideration. Saeed explains that it was because 'Hadith based *tafsir* limits

164 TQ, 2: 149.
165 Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 45–46.
166 Troll, 226. Which work?
167 Pānīpatī, *Khutbat*, 1: 6.
168 Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 19.
169 Pānīpatī, *Khutbat*, 1: 6.

the meaning of the Qurʾan to a particular historical situation, thus obstructing its universality'.[170] Sayyid Ahmad viewed the Qurʾan's universality as miraculous – though not supernatural – because it remains enduringly relevant in every generation despite the growth of human knowledge. The issue was not that a contextualizing narrative somehow devalues the message; on the contrary, information surrounding the event in which revelation occurred is of sure benefit. As Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'Were there no Mecca or Medina, there would be no Muḥammad. Were there no Muḥammad, there would be no Qurʾan'.[171] The limiting factor was not that Hadith localized revelation to a particular historical event, but rather, the problem was that the reliability of Hadith could not be reasonably assured. Sayyid Ahmad addressed this concern for historicity by placing additional weight upon information found within the arrangement (*naẓm*) of the Qurʾan itself. He first sought information from the context of surrounding passages that might speak to the historical event and as well as to the universality of the message.

Sayyid Ahmad's hermeneutical priority is important for appreciating his interpretative framework. In Israr Ahmed's (d. 2010) deprecative estimation, Sayyid Ahmad reversed the traditional order whereby the Qurʾan is interpreted in light of Hadith, then *tafsīr*, and lastly the writings of the Jews and Christians (*Yahūdī aur Nasāra*). 'Sayyid Ahmad,' Israr claimed, 'has done the exact opposite'.[172] Israr's statement was a gross exaggeration, yet his comment makes an important point, namely that Sayyid Ahmad took the Biblical testimony seriously in Qurʾanic interpretation. In *Tafsīr*, Qurʾan and Hadith are read according to Sayyid Ahmad's definition of simple reason, in light of which historical elements could be reconstructed, and with a distinct awareness of existing Christian and Jewish communities and their scriptural traditions. Let us now consider some representative examples from *Tafsīr*.

15 Jesus's Miraculous Birth

The first case to be considered is the narration of Jesus's birth in *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān* Q 3:42–47 (47–52).[173] The stated intent was to correct the assumption traditionally held by Muslims and Christians that Jesus was conceived supernaturally. When considered in the light of reason, Sayyid Ahmad argues, the attribution

170 Saeed, *Interpreting the Qurʾān*, 19.

171 TQ, 1: 29.

172 Muḥamad Ajmal Iṣlāhī, *Taṣānīf-i Farāhī ka ghayr matbua sarmāya* (Azamgarh: unpublished), 93. Accessed online at www.hamid-uddin-farahi.org, accessed 16 February 2020.

173 TQ, 2: 15–35.

of Jesus's birth to supernatural means is best understood as a later development by Christians inhabiting the Graeco-Roman world who were swayed by prevailing religious expectations. He begins the analysis with a philological argument that the term 'virgin', as found in the account in Matthew's Gospel and in its reference to the prophecy in the Book of Isaiah (7:14), actually means 'young maiden', and it does not signify one who has not had sexual relations. This is a complete reversal of the position set out in *Tabyīn* Part 3, where he cites the commentary of Mathew Henry and Thomas Scott to argue the exact opposite.[174] The term 'pure', Sayyid Ahmad explains, signified that Mary was honourable according to cultural norms and marital expectations. The period of betrothal proceeded according to custom and marital relations were not precipitated, but rather were fulfilled at the proper time. The rhetorical question in Q 3:47 (52) and similarly in Luke 1:34 ('How can I have a child when no man has touched me?') confirms that the marriage had not be consumated. It is for this reason, Sayyid Ahmad concludes, that Jesus's disciples, along with others in the audience, did not show any inclination to think that his birth was different from any other.

This reading protected the text but challenged tradition. Sayyid Ahmad echoes Johann von Mosheim's (d. 1755) observation, which he cited decades earlier in *Tabyīn*, that 'many histories and fables were written, of no bad intention perhaps, by those who were superstitious' to explain a belief concerning which the New Testament remains virtually silent.[175] Again, the aim was to debunk the logic behind the need to interpret the event as supernatural. The issue was not that the text was unreliable, but rather that the reading was conditioned by tradition. All births are miraculous, and they are also natural. Some births, such as that of Adam and Eve, are more difficult to explain than others, but this is due to the current state of human understanding. Nevertheless, when properly read he argues, the passages in the Bible and the Qur'an do not require that the birth be understood as supernatural.

Furthermore, Sayyid Ahmad drew attention to the influence of Christian tradition on the interpretation of the Qur'an. The Muslim account of Jesus's birth, he insists, was but one of many examples where the Qur'an was subjected to erroneous interpretation because of over reliance on Christian tradition. On multiple occasions in the commentary, he notes that numerous notions about

174 TK, 3: 40–41. John McFarlane, *Holy Bible and Commentaries of Henry & Scott* (Glasgow, Edinburgh and London: William Collins, Queens Printer), 1858.

175 Ibid, 88. John Laurence von Mosheim, *Historical commentaries on the state of Christianity during the first three hundred and twenty-five years from the Christian era: being a translation of the commentaries on the affairs of the Christian before the time of Constantine the Great*, vols 1 and 2, trans. Robert Studley Vidal (New York: S. Converse, 1854), 140.

the Qurʾanic text proposed by Muslim scholars came about in response to – both opposition to and direct dependence (*taqlīd*) on – Christian theology. This has led to the acceptance of beliefs that the text does not require but that have been taken for granted. The virgin birth of Jesus, which he does not regard as consistent with the Qurʾanic account, has been fully accepted in Islamic theology. Meanwhile, there are others elements that have been vehemently rejected, such as the earthly location of the Garden of Eden and the crucifixion of Christ, which he believes to be supported by the Qurʾan but rejected by Muslims because it is the Christian view.

16 Jesus Speaks in Infancy

A second episode from this section of *Tafsīr* is the incident of Jesus speaking as an infant as found in Q 3:46 (53).[176] Sayyid Ahmad again challenges an established reading of this passage and laments the erroneous reliance upon tradition. Exegetes, he argues, have followed the 'preposterous' opinion of Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 687), a Companion of the Prophet, in reading this passage to indicate that Jesus argued with Jewish scholars from the cradle only forty days after his birth. As this defies simple reason, an alternative explanation is required. Drawing from an explanatory note recorded in al-Rāzī's *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Sayyid Ahmad notes that Abū al-Qāsim Balkhī (d. 934) clarified that the term *mahd* simply signifies a flat place. The error, according to Sayyid Ahmad's view, was caused by the conflation of two events: Jesus's birth and his dispute with Jewish scholars on his journey to Jerusalem when he was a boy, an allusion to the incident reported in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus spoke to religious leaders in the temple courts (Luke 2:41–52). Due to the absence of punctuation marks in the earlier versions of the Qurʾan, the grammar has been misunderstood.[177] Jesus was not speaking from the cradle, but rather he spoke as an adolescent and demonstrated an informed eloquence far beyond his years. If Jesus's birth is presumed to be supernatural, the reader is predisposed to accept that other supernatural occurrences would follow, such as a speaking infant.

This case, as with the one above, demonstrates how Islamic and Christian sources can be considered together to solve an interpretative dilemma. The result is the reading of Q 3:46 (52) through the testimony of Luke 2:41–52. As in *Tabyīn*, once again the Qurʾan and the Bible elucidate one another and the pre-determined principles constrain the interpretive possibilities.

176 TQ, 2: 30.

177 Rahman, 'Interpretation of the Birth of Jesus', 23–30.

Reason demands an alternative solution, and the Bible supplies the needed information.

Sayyid Ahmad again complains that tradition has been handed down without critical evaluation. In the exegesis of this passage, he also identifies another issue of importance. He observes the complexity of deciphering the meaning of a scriptural text because of its form. The earliest editions of the Qur'an, he notes, appeared without punctuation and diacritical marks. He draws attention to the complex range of issues involved in accurately rendering even a single word.

17 Jesus Raises the Dead

A third case is the account of Jesus bringing the dead back to life, as found in Sūrat Āl 'Imrān Q 3:49 (56). The raising of the dead was a dramatic display of power. Unlike the virgin birth, which was not known to Jesus's disciples or audience, his healing ministry was conducted in public and this strengthened his messianic claim. Nevertheless, as the events described (Mark 5:21–43; Matthew 9:18–25) are contrary to plain reason, they must, according to Sayyid Ahmad's principles, be read figuratively (*majāzī*). These passages, he explains, refer not to the physically deceased but rather to the 'spiritually dead', who are brought to life through faith.[178] This carries forward his exposition of the Gospel of Matthew, that people are dead in sin and in need of the 'spiritual light' in order to be made truly alive. Sayyid Ahmad again contradicts traditional interpretation and presents an alternative drawn from the Bible in order to rationalize the supernatural events apparently described in the text.

A close reading of this passage in the commentary provides a different, and perhaps previously unnoticed insight into how Sayyid Ahmad thought about the miraculous. Here we see a particularly clear example that is useful for isolating what it is that differentiates his approach from that of other rationalists, and this points to the originality of his thought. First, it is necessary to recall that Sayyid Ahmad accepted the texts in their present form. His argument is not that the Biblical or Qur'anic accounts had been altered, or somehow erroneously transcribed, so his challenge is not levied against the texts. He is well aware of the complex issues related to their history, including the process of canonization within the respective communal traditions. Rather, the problem he perceives is one of interpretation. The metaphorical intent of this passage had been grossly overlooked by traditional readers. From his perspective, the

178 Pānīpatī, *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, vol. 5, 366.

metaphorical intention of the text is completely obvious to the honest thinker, or to one who is not compelled to blindly follow tradition or succumb to the fear of elemental forces by insisting on supernatural provision to sustain faith. The narrative enlists the image of power over nature to convey the profound truth that one can be physically alive and yet spiritually dead. The purpose of the account is to teach that true 'life' becomes activated through belief, and that that kind of life is ultimately of far greater importance than physical necessities and desires, even than life itself.

This perspective in itself is not original. Shahzad Bashir has convincingly argued that miraculous narratives present multiple layers of meaning. Events that are apparently described as supernatural were readily understood to invite complex metaphorical readings. Miracles recounted in Sufi hagiography, which represents by far the largest cache of textual resources from this setting, describe not just a holy person's supernatural feats, but were also known to convey the transfer of 'affective forces that activate love and desire'.[179] Sayyid Ahmad conveys in layman's terms this rational alternative to a supernatural reading, which is a perspective both continuous with and indigenous to this context. He applies this multi-layered view to scripture, first to the Bible and then to the Qur'an. In this case, he applies a metaphorical reading of Jesus's raising the dead because the events did not mesh with the observable natural order. He accepts the historicity of the events and the accuracy of the recorded statement, but challenges the framework within which the words have been understood. The irrationality of what was reported as a physical event serves as a marker to underscore the central importance of a deeper layer of meaning within it. Properly read, the purpose of this passage is to affirm the spiritual authority of one who has the power to raise the spiritually dead and to affect every aspect of human physical and psychological interconnectivity. This is a force that Sayyid Ahmad had personally experienced in reading of the Gospel of Matthew as recounted in Part 3.

In the exegesis of this passage, Sayyid Ahmad restates an issue that he apparently regards as of central concern. He again lambasts Muslim exegetes for the 'habit' of blindly following Christian interpreters to construct a presentation of Jesus. He finds that this is partially due to the fact that Christians regard miracles as the most assured evidence of prophetic identity. Indeed, Christians exalted Jesus above Muḥammad on the basis of his supernatural miracles. One consequence of this, Sayyid Ahmad concludes, is that this generated a jealous Muslim response. This has perpetuated Muslim insistence on supernatural events in general, and of the supernatural nature of the

179 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 22.

Qurʾan in particular. The Qurʾan is the miracle *par excellence* that defines and authenticates Muḥammad as the ultimate and final prophet. The Qurʾan is a miraculous sign that is above and beyond human comprehension. This counterbalances the 'sign' wrought by Jesus, but the perceived need for this supernatural authentication, Sayyid Ahmad claims, in practice deified the text and stymied accurate interpretation.

18 Jesus's Heavenly Ascension

The final example to be considered is the account of Jesus's ascension to heaven as recounted in *Sūrat Āl ʿImrān*, Q 3:55. This is an extended discussion running to more than 40 pages, 15 of which concentrate on the crucifixion. To my knowledge, this is the most extensive discussion of the death of Jesus recorded anywhere in the history of the *tafsīr* genre. This alone should signify its great importance, though I have not found to date a single academic study on this aspect of Sayyid Ahmad's work. Let us now consider this final episode.

The commentary begins with a description of the travail of Jesus's crucifixion in graphic detail. A bold image of the cross is reproduced at the top of the page to clarify beyond any shadow of a doubt the subject under discussion. It is important to observe that this is not the first occasion on which Sayyid Ahmad has expressed his views on the crucifixion. The account here reveals a development in our author's analysis of Jesus's death. In *Tabyīn* Part 3, Jesus's ordeal and physical death on the Roman cross are affirmed as facts:

> In his thirty-third year, Ḥaḍhrat Masiḥ was handed over to the Jews by Judas Iscariot and arrested. They stretched him on a cross, and according to their understanding, killed him forever; but he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven.
>
> cf. Acts 2:1–4[180]

In *Tafsīr*, now that his naturalist (*necharī*) hermeneutic has crystalized, Sayyid Ahmad reflects on this event with new eyes. He upholds the historicity of Jesus's suffering and death, but not of the resurrection and ascension. The former was a natural event and is read literally, the latter were not and thus are read figuratively.[181]

180 TK, 3: 4.

181 TQ, 2: 44–45.

The Qurʾan accepts Jesus's physical death, according to Sayyid Ahmad's argument. He supports this conclusion philologically from Muslim tradition. There are three verses that support a physical death: Q 3:48 (55); 5:117; 19:34 (33), and only one verse that appears to disagree, Q 4:156 (157). This last verse, he explains, holds the key to unlocking the Qurʾanic view of Jesus's crucifixion and the subsequent confusion regarding his death. It contains the only mention of the cross in the Qurʾan, and it is the only verse that appears to reject Jesus's death:

> 'We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God'. They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him – …[182]

Sayyid Ahmad, however, would render the meaning of this verse differently. Citing explanations by Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn Isḥāq, as found in al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, he argues that the Arabic terms in these verses (*mutawaffīka* and *tawaffaytanī*) were understood by the earliest Muslims to clearly indicate physical death. He recounts three examples recorded in *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* to substantiate not only the acceptability but also the prevalence of the view supporting this meaning among the most revered representatives of the early community. Al-Rāzī reports, furthermore, the exchange between them concerning precisely how long Jesus remained dead once Allah 'caused him to die'. The first opinion is that of Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. between 725 and 737), of the second generation (*tābiʿīn*), who was esteemed for his knowledge of Jewish tradition (*Israʾīliyyāt*). He claimed that Jesus remained dead for three hours before being resuscitated and 'taken up to heaven'. Ibn Isḥāq (d. 768), who collected oral traditions and composed one of the first biographies of the Prophet, claimed that Jesus remained dead for closer to seven hours. Mālik ibn Anas (d. 795), a jurist and revered compiler of traditions, argued that Allah caused Jesus to die at the instant of raising him to heaven.[183] Hence, in Sayyid Ahmad's view, there is sound precedent for acceptance that the Qurʾan reported Jesus's physical death.

To make his case, Sayyid Ahmad examines Q 4:156 (157), the verse that appears to contradict the other three. If properly read, he claims, this verse does

182 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 65.

183 TQ, 2: 44.

not reject Jesus's crucifixion and death at all. To refute this well-established and practically normative view, he presents two arguments, one derived from the structure (*naẓm*) of the passage, and the other from the laws of nature. Since the Qur'an does not contradict itself, he argues, this verse must be interpreted in congruity with the other accounts mentioned above that indicate the factuality of Jesus's physical death. In accordance with his own interpretative principles, established and carried forward from his earliest writings, Sayyid Ahmad attributes interpretative priority to evidence located within the text over that from external sources. Thus, he reads the phrase 'they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him' not to deny the historicity of the events, but rather to repudiate the idea that 'the Jews' had power to accomplish that which would be contrary to the will of Allah.[184] Though it is conceivable that one person might be mistaken for another, which is the explanation frequently supplied to displace Jesus from the cross, Sayyid Ahmad holds that this interpretation is fundamentally flawed. As a matter of principle, a combination of unsound Hadith and exegetical opinion should not overturn clear Qur'anic testimony. The rejection of Jesus's crucifixion is not required by the text, and so it should be read as a historical event.

Second, Sayyid Ahmad challenges the customary interpretation of this verse because it violates the laws of nature. In the standard narrative, someone else endured the cross. Jesus was spared suffering and physical death through a supernatural rescue. This account, however, contravenes the order of God's work in creation. As in the case of Jesus's birth, Sayyid Ahmad interprets the accounts of Jesus's death according to the 'law of nature'. His exposition of Q 4:156 (157) is original, and merits detailed consideration.

He presents the rationale for his interpretation by identifying a literary structure in the passage. The style of his writing is indicative of his thought process and so it is helpful to reproduce it here. Traditional exegesis, he explains, addressed four elements in the passage:

(1) The subject: the one on the cross.
(2) The similitude (*mashābah bahī*): what appeared to be.
(3) The reason (*wajāh-i tashbīh*) for the similitude.
(4) The audience: to whom did this appear (*mashābah lahūm*).

The customary reading has understood these elements in the following manner:

(1) Who was on the cross? Simon Cyrene or Judas Iscariot.
(2) What appeared to be? It appeared that Jesus was on the cross, but he was not.

184 Ibid., 46.

(3) Cause? Another was caused to appear to be Jesus and to die in his place.
(4) Who was the audience? Jewish observers.

Sayyid Ahmad challenges this reading, and claims that it should be as follows:

(1) Who was on the cross? Jesus.
(2) What appeared to be? Jesus appeared to have been defeated.
(3) Cause? The condition of his body.
(4) Who was the audience? Jewish observers.

Having considered these variables, Sayyid Ahmad first underscores the fact that elements 1 and 4 are unambiguous. Jesus was on the cross, as was seen by Jewish observers. This can be proved by basic observable reason, and is therefore accepted as historically accurate. However, as the customary rendering of elements 2 and 3 require supernatural intervention, which Sayyid Ahmad categorically rejects, a plausible explanation must be sought. The customary reading entails a divine rescue whereby someone else was mistaken for Jesus and suffered in his stead while the actual Jesus was taken up unharmed to heaven. The issue concerns similitude, or what appeared to have occurred. For Sayyid Ahmad, it appears that Jesus's opponents succeeded in thwarting God's plan, but this was not the case. The verse, from his reading, challenges Jewish claims to have killed Jesus, rather than Jesus's having been crucified.

This leads to a subsequent question. If death is natural and inevitable, what were the circumstances of Jesus's death?[185] In Sayyid Ahmad's opinion, the evidence is not conclusive. Christ was crucified and he certainly died, either on the cross, in the tomb, or perhaps later at an unknown time: 'He died his own death, that is whichever death God had allotted for him'.[186] In final assessment, Sayyid Ahmad reasons that Jesus's followers likely concealed his grave so that enemies could do no mischief, as did the followers of ʿAlī, Muḥammad's martyred cousin and son-in-law. In the absence of a grave and corpse, stories arose of a heavenly ascension.[187]

Sayyid Ahmad considers it possible that Jesus's state of extreme exhaustion could have caused bystanders to believe that he had passed, but that he in fact died later. He strengthens a case for this argument by citing two examples from Christian tradition of persons who survived crucifixion. Given the testimony of others who suffered longer and yet survived, and the length of time that

185 Ibid., 45.
186 Ibid., 44–45.
187 Ibid., 41. His reference to ʿAlī in this context is likely due to ʿAlī and Jesus both being seen as martyrs; however, it is also noteworthy that some Shi'i interpreters also make an esoteric typological connection between them. Karen G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 33.

Jesus was hung on the cross, Sayyid Ahmad concludes that it is unlikely that Jesus would have died so quickly. He also considers, however, the extensive torture Jesus endured, and the excessive loss of blood caused by the severity of his wounds. Thus, it is reasonable to understand that Christ died either on the cross or in the tomb.

Sayyid Ahmad remains committed to his acceptance of the present Biblical text. Thus, he also reasons that, if Jesus died on the cross or immediately thereafter in the tomb, it would create discontinuity within the Gospel accounts, because, if Jesus did not survive the cross, how does one account for his later interactions with the living? Were these imagined encounters in the upper room, where Jesus ate and drank with his disciples after the crucifixion?[188] Unfortunately, Sayyid Ahmad does not pursue the discussion any further. Rather than giving a protracted reflection, he simply concludes that Jesus died a 'natural death' and was buried in an unknown location.[189] The Qur'an is content not to specify the precise circumstances of Jesus's death and this was sufficient for Sayyid Ahmad too. In summary, the Gospels and the Qur'an agree on the historicity of the crucifixion, and it was up to Christian interpreters to account for the subsequent interactions recounted in the New Testament that would contradict a physical death upon the cross.

A further element in this passage is highly significant. Sayyid Ahmad claims that the Muslim rejection of Jesus's crucifixion, and the subsequent interpretation of Q 4:156 (157), was not indigenous to Muslim thinking but was a reactionary view that developed in response to Christian pressure. Rejection of the crucifixion, he writes, was a later development caused by encounters with heretical Christian sects.[190] Though specific citations are not offered, he claims that this idea developed later amidst an atmosphere of communal tension. 'When the *'ulamā'-i Islām* heard from some Christian sects (*firqa*) the saying that it was either Simon or Judas who was on the cross, they immediately changed the meaning of the Qur'an'.[191] Although this idea may initially sound extremely unlikely, it is of interest to note that, according to Todd Lawson's convincing examination, Sayyid Ahmad may very well have been correct. Lawson demonstrates that the exegetical history of Q 4:157–59 is far from monolithic.

188 The subject of eating with a spiritual body, as well as that of 'consuming' the bodies of disciples and masters, is one of continued interest in Persianate Islam. For extensive detail, see Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 49, 164–186.

189 Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, founder of the Ahmadiyya, developed this idea and taught that Jesus travelled to India and is buried in Kashmir. Sayyid Ahmad did not agree with this view.

190 TQ, 2: 46.

191 Ibid., 145.

The earliest statement of Muslim rejection of the cross appeared quite late and in a Christian source. Indeed, there is no record of Muslim rejection of Jesus's crucifixion prior to the accusation made by John of Damascus (d. 749), who claimed that Muslims were proponents of Docetism, a view deemed heretical by orthodox Christians, who similarly posited that Jesus only appeared to die.[192] In the absence of citations in Sayyid Ahmad's text, it is difficult to do more than note his opinion. This again raises intriguing questions, however, pertaining to the sources that were available to him. In the exegesis of this passage, he challenges a Jewish claim that Jesus was stoned. Gabriel Said Reynolds has noted a similar account from a Talmud tractate. This was a polemical description and could have been available to Jewish diaspora communities. Although Sayyid Ahmad's source is not presented, the obscurity of his comment is noteworthy.[193] For him, this was a case where custom had constrained interpretation.

In summary, Sayyid Ahmad challenges the customary interpretation of Jesus's death.[194] He concludes that this was an issue of *mutashābihāt*, where tradition had been 'in doubt', but interpreters had proceeded as if there were certainty. They have glossed over the historical record by overemphasizing one particular portion of a verse in order to overturn what was plainly stated in three others.[195] Though careful to state that this is not his own belief, he provides a detailed and objective explanation of the Christian doctrine of Atonement (*fidya aur kafāra*), which is perhaps unprecedented in the *tafsīr* genre. In Sayyid Ahmad's personal interpretation, the Way of Calvary was one of tragic catharsis rather than atoning sacrifice. Jesus died the death of a martyr. The salvific accomplishment in the death of Christ was not atonement, but rather faithfulness to God unto death.

Sayyid Ahmad finds great significance in the cross. Had his description been more succinct, it might have been regarded as merely an informative summary. But the narrative is prolonged and provides excruciating detail. In the account, he shifts into what is unmistakably a lament, reminiscent in form and purpose of the requiems (*marsīya*) that are pervasive in Shi'ī martyrdom literature. 'The hands are stretched out,' he recounts, 'and nailed deep into the beam'.[196] The

192 Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study In the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 22–25.

193 Could this have been one of the texts in Chīriākotī's trunk that Sayyid Ahmad requested? In the correspondence, Sayyid Ahmad Khan referred to a trunk where Chīriākotī kep many Biblical resources. Pānīpatī, *Maktūbat*, vol. 1., 376–379.

194 Reynolds, 'Muslim Jesus', 257.

195 TQ, 2: 35–8.

196 Ibid., 38.

details do more than inform, they evoke emotion. The reader is guided not only to accept the factuality of Jesus's having been hung the cross, but also to mourn (*mātam*) and so to emotionally participate in the events through the reading. Jesus's martyrdom is likened to that of Ḥusayn at Karbala, and his holy and innocent suffering is similarly to be mourned.

Sayyid Ahmad concludes his consideration of the Qurʾanic account of the crucifixion by disclosing a profoundly personal connection with the event. He writes:

> Thousands of Muslims live with doubt in their hearts over so many issues, including this one. But there are those in Islam [such as myself] who believe without doubt. Such seekers have always been called *kāfir*, even as today, but one's faith is visible to God.[197]

It can be inferred from this reflection that this issue is symptomatic of the wider state of Muslim – Christian relations. Christians and Muslims remain at an impasse. Christians have not positively assessed the role of Muḥammad because they are 'in doubt'. Their understanding is lacking, even as is that of Sayyid Ahmad's sharpest critics on his assessment of the Bible and of aspects of Christian belief. 'But the faithful,' he goes on to say, 'have always been taken to the gallows (*sūlī* [the Urdu term he uses in his commentary for the cross])'.[198] In this way, Sayyid Ahmad places himself within the legacy of Jesus, ʿAlī, and Ḥusayn as one who was misunderstood and wrongfully accused, and who was willing to remain faithful even unto death. Despite heavy criticism from his readership, past and present, Sayyid Ahmad insists unapologetically that the Qurʾan should be read as accepting Jesus's crucifixion and physical death, but also as rejecting even the possibility of his heavenly ascension.

19 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have given an overview of Sayyid Ahmad's commentary on the Bible, which demonstrates a high regard for the present Biblical text. This is further demonstrated by the use of Biblical testimony in Qurʾanic exegesis. The four sections considered from *Tabyīn* Parts 1–3 and *Tafsīr* recognize that the present Biblical text reflects the scriptures of the Jews and Christians as affirmed in the Qurʾan. In effect, texts from the Qurʾan and the Bible, with

197 Ibid., 49.
198 Pānīpatī, *Khatūt Banām Sir Sayyid*, 45.

occasional support from Hadith, are read together in presumed consonance so that the texts elucidated one another.

Through a close reading, we identified a significant shift in Sayyid Ahmad's thought in *Tabyīn* Part 2. In Part 3, which was composed first, Sayyid Ahmad patently accepts the accounts of supernatural events narrated in the Gospel of Mathew. He affirms the accounts of the birth and ascension of Jesus without any qualification, as well as corporeal manifestations of the angel Gabriel and of Satan. In Part 2, which was composed between three and five years later, Sayyid Ahmad rejects the possibility of supernatural activity and this hermeneutic was carried forward throughout the remainder of his writing career, as seen in the examples from *Tafsīr*. This hermeneutical shift required Sayyid Ahmad to reinterpret accounts of Jesus's life and ministry, along with those of other prophets, to bring them into conformity with the observable laws of nature. This development had profound implications, particularly for Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation. As will be seen in the next chapter, commitment to this principle qualified not only the miraculous advent of Jesus, but that of the Qur'an as well.

CHAPTER 4

Prophecy: Rehearsed and Unrehearsed

Sayyid Ahmad was convinced that the revelation (*waḥy*) and divine word (*kalām ilāhī*) in the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament remained applicable to Muslims in the context of Qur'an interpretation. This attitude, though rare, was made exceedingly clear. It was seen in his earliest exegetical writing in *Tabyīn* Part 3 (ca. 1860) and it persisted over the course of 40 years into his final writings in *Tafsīr*. In this chapter, we set out to elucidate the view of revelation that shaped this conviction. We shall begin by considering Sayyid Ahmad's applied epistemology, and then shift attention to his view of natural and prophetic revelation, that received by Muḥammad in the Qur'an, as well as that of earlier prophets recorded in the Bible.

1 To Know What One Knows

Sayyid Ahmad assumed the existence of universal principles and these informed his understanding of revelation. The universe operates according to laws. There is order and coherence. All proceeds in a state of contingency, and this is the natural outworking of cause and effect. Human knowledge, in its current state, is not fully developed, and inner workings of the created order remain a mystery. Once incontrovertible evidence is garnered in a particular field, that knowledge impinges upon the interpretation of all fields of reality, even scripture. In essence, because revelation occurs within history, it must operate accordingly.

Tabyīn provides a good starting point for assessing Sayyid Ahmad's epistemology. The earliest indication of his position on the status of Biblical revelation, found in *Tabyīn* Part 3, was grounded in personal experience. Sayyid Ahmad was convinced by the sensations of 'inner peace' and 'spiritual light' he experienced while reading the text. The reader, he claimed, encountered the same light as that experienced by the original audience when the words were first spoken. The words seemed to transcend time and space; they were incandescent spirit words. This may at first seem like an unlikely source of knowledge for a rationalist so intent on reconciling religion and science, but this was a pivotal point. This was an important observation, not only because it established Sayyid Ahmad's appreciation of the text, but more so because it served as an indicator to the sources of his epistemology.

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Each of *Tabyīn*'s three parts begins with a systematic restatement of our author's beliefs, which proceeded from within a discursive tradition. Christian Troll has pondered the connection between his Sufi upbringing and his rationalist exploration:

> 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?[1]

One finds this to be precisely the case. Sayyid Ahmad was a man of his time, and also of his place. As a clearer picture emerges of his Indian Persianate context, the confluence of mysticism and rationalism in Sayyid Ahmad's thinking becomes more discernible.

Bruce Lawrence also considers this confluence: 'Though one cannot lock Sir Sayyid into any single ideology, including rationalism, it is possible to locate the persistent, recurrent tendencies in his thought and to interpret them in a contextual framework'.[2] It was a framework marked by 'rationalism and mysticism', a 'synthesizing propensity' that sought to bridge disparate realities and to direct them towards practical application.[3] This awareness helps us to situate Sayyid Ahmad within his intellectual milieu, and to comprehend how such a pivotal decision, as seen in this earliest assessment of Biblical revelation, was grounded in experience.

It is impossible, as Shahzad Bashir has cautioned, to disentangle Sufi influence from within the various religious strands of influence in pre-modern Indian Islam.[4] But to trace these interwoven threads, we must revisit the Sufi spirituality pervasive in this milieu, for it is only there that we can recognize the philosophical undercurrents at play.

As described in the previous chapter, Sayyid Ahmad makes ready use of Sufi terminology in *Tabyīn* Part 3, and this influence is far more apparent here that in his subsequent writings. Again, Persian terms contextualize the paradigm in which Sayyid Ahmad approaches religious knowledge. The master-disciple (*pīrī-murīdī*) construct, for example, is repeatedly applied to describe the relationship between Jesus and his followers. This language seldom appeared in the Christian vernacular literature, though it was familiar

1 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 221.
2 Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements', 62.
3 Ibid., 77.
4 Bashir, 215–216.

and regarded as appropriate to convey the idea of tutelage. Jesus was portrayed as an exalted spiritual Master (*pīr*), one who illuminated the way, or to use the language from the Gospel of John, one who embodied the way (John 14:6, 'I am the way'). Within this frame of reference, individuals – including the most exalted prophets – attain spiritual progress. Through an arduous progression of trials, one proceeds incrementally (*darja*) upward through more elevated stages (*muqām*) of spiritual development. Sayyid Ahmad also makes specific reference to the role of Sufi saints in Islam's successful expansion, portraying them as faithful heirs to the Prophetic legacy. His language and perspective are unmistakable; this was a Sufi reading of the Gospel.

It is important to recall the proximity of mysticism and rationalism in Persianate Islam. They were not mutually exclusive. The mystical aspect of the framework is less evident in Sayyid Ahmad's later writings as it becomes overshadowed by rationalism, but it remains operative – present, as we shall see, but expressed in a different manner. Indeed, in Sayyid Ahmad's Delhi, where he lived and learned for 34 years, the mystical and the rational were more like two sides of the same coin.

2 Experience as the Basis of Knowledge

The idea that experience provides a fundamental basis of knowledge has an established place in Islamic theology. The experience of tranquillity was frequently regarded as the most trusted basis for confidence[5] and was a trusted method even among the highly revered thinkers, among the *'ulamā'* and *auliyā'*. It was this 'sense of peace' that provided the undergirding conviction for Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, for example, to set out his reforms.[6] A clear conceptual articulation of this epistemology can be seen in texts such as the *Mughni*, a text by 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Asadabadī (d. 1025), a prominent Mu'tazilī theologian of the Shāfi'ī school, who pondered the nature of the Qur'an. He was exploring the implications of regarding the sacred text as uncreated, which was a central theme of enquiry in Baghdad in his day, and realize that, if the nature of the Qur'an is eternal, there would be unavoidable consequences for the doctrine of 'God's Oneness' (*tawḥīd*) and the concept of divine justice (*'adl*). In his deliberations, he argued that the most assured way to reach a conclusion, and to have confidence in a conviction, was through the experience of the tranquillity of

5 Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 135–189.

6 Jon Armajani, *Dynamic Islam: Liberal Muslim Perspectives in a Transnational Age* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 98.

the soul (*sukūn an-nafs*). 'There must be a cause (*'illa*)', he noted, 'by which one is convinced (*i'tiqād*)'.[7] For 'Abd al-Jabbār and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, the experience of tranquillity confirmed reason, and on occasion functioned when no other form of proof could suffice.

Although this method is inherently subjective, experience was regarded as solid and conclusive evidence. 'Abd al-Jabbār distinguished between the subjective and the objective: 'The first forms the basis of human knowing, the second is a way to human knowing'.[8] The objective approach was the induction of knowledge through perception, which was often accompanied by enduring doubt. The subjective approach, however, allowed one to be truly convinced. Truth is accompanied by a 'tranquillity of the soul' (*sukūn an-nafs*), a peaceful affirmation that confirms and assures. Conviction proceeds from subjective experience.

The quest to ascertain the basis of knowledge – to know what one knows – was a central characteristic of reformist writings in this setting. One subject of pressing concern was the place of Hadith in delineating the parameters of Sunna. 'Abd al-Jabbār's treatise challenged the traditional reliance upon *taqlīd*, or the acceptance of ideas passed down as a reliable source of authority. His concern was to reform a religious pedagogy that had become resistant to innovative and critical – or in this case analogical – thinking. To make his case, he argued that true knowledge (*'ilm*) must be accompanied by the experience of tranquillity. Ignorance (*jahl*) does not yield tranquillity, and agitation is an indicator of error.[9] If an assumed principle is observably true but tranquillity is missing, something is awry. The most frequent cause of this condition, he explained, was reliance upon *taqlīd*. You do not know what you know; you know only what you were told. In the discussions of Sunna, interpreters worked in the knowledge of contradictory Hadith reports. Despite efforts to sift through the thousands of reported traditions, ascertaining which of them were assuredly authentic remained an enduring challenge. The reader was compelled to accept some and reject others. It was the awareness of this complexity that undergirded the repudiation in this Mu'tazilī text of the traditionalist approach to religious knowledge. This same concern was reflected in the writings of Delhi reformists such as Shāh Walī Allāh, who played a crucial role in reinvigorating the study of their principal works in India.

Sayyid Ahmad's quest for universal principles that could be applicable for ascertaining knowledge in general, and for interpreting revelation in particular,

7 Peters, *God's Created Speech*, 43.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

can only be understood through his association with this intellectual lineage, whose ideas reverberate throughout his works. Even before his shift to a more entrenched form of rationalism as seen in *Tabyīn* Part 2, the pathway in this direction was already open. Consider Sayyid Ahmad's statement in the exegesis of Matthew 5:17–20, where Jesus says, 'I have not come to abrogate but rather to fulfill the books of the prophets'. Here we find another glimpse of his thought process:

> Somehow human reason (*ʿaql*) and human knowledge (*ʿilm*) gradually advance (*taraqqi*) towards an uncertain limit, and as long as the mode of acquiring these attributes has not reached its final limit (*ghāyat hadd*), there will be continuous progress in the mode of acquiring attributes and formulating *sharīʿat* [plural].[10]

From this early date, which is before his European journey and the incontrovertible shift in his thinking, Sayyid Ahmad had already been guided into a mode of considering human flourishing that was open and expansive. He was not looking back to the earliest Muslim communities for the ideal model, but rather he foresaw that the *sharīʿa*, the perfection of the divine will and knowledge, would become more clearly understood and applicable as humanity advanced towards greater knowledge.

This subjective basis for knowledge, however, is problematic. For ʿAbd al-Jabbār, conclusions were definitive. There were no degrees, there is either truth or not. The problem is that conclusions are individual. One cannot experience someone else's tranquillity. To accept something as truth on the basis of a teacher's conviction or someone else's report was to derive knowledge from imitation, which is the approach that Sayyid Ahmad directly sought to challenge. This may be why he, though convinced by experience, produces a logical rationale for his position as presented in Part 1. As he states in Part 3, the authenticity of the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Matthew is confirmed by the conviction (*iʿtiqād*) of the experience of 'peace in the heart'.[11] Although he did not reproduce this statement in subsequent writings, we have here an insight into his process. We see the basis upon which Sayyid Ahmad embarked on his search for an objective way to understand revelation in its manifold forms.

10 TK, 3: 109–110.

11 Ibid., 99; Exegesis of Matthew 5:2.

3 Experiment as the Way to Knowledge

There is a shift from the centrality of experience in *Tabyīn* Part 3 to that of experiment in Parts 1 and 2. It is important to recall that, in this period of his life, Sayyid Ahmad had been involved in the translation of European scientific texts into Urdu for almost twenty years.[12] New ways to describe and evaluate knowledge were opened before him as he supported the translation of literally thousands of pages. European 'common sense' philosophy had long been familiar to him. There were references to the works of John Locke and Edward Gibbon in his writings, along with allusions to Charles Darwin and many others. It was not these that he credited, however, but rather the elders of philosophy such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240). For had they not preserved and refined ancient knowledge, these European upstarts would not have come so far in their scientific thinking.

With regard to the question of revelation, Sayyid Ahmad does not cite European thinkers to support his arguments, but rather relies upon the works of Muslim stalwarts. He appeals to Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sīnā, for example, to explain that the senses provide awareness of material forms that can be grasped by the intellect. He appeals to the great classical thinkers such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn ʿArabī to support the paradoxical view that some knowledge has only been made accessible to the intellect through prophecy.[13] Proceeding within this intellectual tradition, Sayyid Ahmad carries forward a way of thinking that seeks to synthesize human capacity with divine intervention, acknowledging that revelation comes in many ways and to many people, and yet affirming that the highest form is that which was articulated by the legislative prophets (*rusul*). The material world prepares the intellect to receive immaterial forms from the divine world, so there must be coherence between them, between what is observable in nature and what is articulated by these exalted persons. The quest to explore this conclusion propelled Sayyid Ahmad forward.

Consider Ibn Sīnā for example. 'Universal principles', he explained, 'are established through induction (*istiqrāʾ*) and experimentation (*tajriba*)'.[14] Ibn Sīnā's writings stimulated Shāh Walī Allāh, and gave rise to the conception of the fundamental difference in essence (*dhāt*) 'between God and the

12 Wilder, *Selected Essays*, 27.

13 TK, 1: 2.

14 Toby Mayer, 'Ibn Sina's "Burhan Al-Siddiqin"', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2001): 18–39; Jon McGinnis, 'Scientific Methodologies in Medieval Islam', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41, no. 3 (2003): 307–327.

contingents'.[15] This was foundational to the Delhi sage's view of the nature of existence (*wujūd*), and the process by which 'the unspecified world of divine mystery (*ghayb*) becomes specified in the soil of the empirical world'.[16] It was a search for knowledge that was directly concerned with the interrelation of the Revealer and revelation.

These concepts and terms resonate in Sayyid Ahmad's writings. He was convinced through experience of the Bible's spiritual efficacy, and this catalyzed the quest for logical experimentation of how this could be. Was there a way to account for the process by which 'transcendental outpourings' of revelation become particularized and specified according to the expectations of a particular culture?[17]

The Urdu term *tajriba* can be translated as both 'experiment' and 'experience', and this double entendre is seen in *Tabyīn*. Sayyid Ahmad carries forward Ibn Sīnā's search for universal principles, with particular interest in finding their application to the study of revelation. This line of thinking undergirds Sayyid Ahmad's rationale for studying the Bible, and eventually predisposes him to seek a synergistic reception of the array of ideas brought into the Indian intellectual milieu by Europeans and their post-Enlightenment systems.

4 Knowledge for Salvation

Shams Inati has noted that 'while all Muslim philosophers agree that grasping eternal entities ensures happiness, they differ as to whether such grasping is also necessary for eternal existence'.[18] Sayyid Ahmad would affirm Inati's first premise, and offer a clear position on the second.[19] Compliance with prophetic guidance clarifies the optimal way to live, he would say. Prophets have been the wisest and best of persons, and their leadership has facilitated human flourishing. A person can comprehend the existence of the soul by the intellect, but one can know its function and purpose only through the prophetic.[20] Acceptance of the first premise is determinant for the second. There are

15 Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh*, 57.

16 Ibid., 150.

17 Ibid., 151.

18 Shams C. Inati, 'Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy', in *Routledge Encylopedia of Philosophy*, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-H019-1.

19 TK, 1: 2–6.

20 Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements', 88. Lawrence notes Sayyid Ahmad's dependence on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Arbaʿīn fī uṣūl al-dīn* (Hyderabad: Maṭbaʿat Majlis dāʾirat **al**-maʿārif **al**-ʿUthmāniyya, 1934).

immaterial forms, Sayyid Ahmad wrote, that can be grasped by the intellect but these are ultimately insufficient for ascertaining the central message of prophetic revelation: *tawḥīd*. 'The foremost purpose of revelation is to endow humanity with the knowledge of *tawḥīd*, that God is One'.[21] Indeed, the clarity by which *tawḥīd* was expressed is the measure applied by our author to differentiate the modes of prophetic revelation. The glory of the Qurʾan, he claims, is the clarity with which this doctrine was sustained. For Sayyid Ahmad, esteem for Muḥammad is due – first and foremost – because of the sustained fidelity by which he articulated the doctrine of divine unicity. Inati's 'eternal existence', or that which Sayyid Ahmad terms salvation (*najāt*), was announced by the prophets and could only be received by faith. As Christian Troll has elegantly translated it, all that is required for one to have the hope of heaven's eternal bliss is 'simply to say that he has spiritual belief (*yakīn*). From thence any work that is done from the heart (*taṣdīq dil kā*) to God, doesn't make him an unbeliever (*kufr*)'.[22] Salvation is determined by monotheistic belief; it is by faith alone.

This soteriology is foundational for Sayyid Ahmad's scriptural exegesis. It is crucial to recognize that his view of salvation did not hinge upon accepting the prophetic status of Muḥammad, or of any particular prophet. Although it is difficult to define with any sense of accuracy how far his immediate audience agreed with him at the time, Sayyid Ahmad's view clearly sets him in direct opposition to the present consensus amongst traditional Sunni schools. The standard view, which is understood to have crystalized in the twelfth century, and is frequently associated with al-Ghazālī, asserted that the advent of Muḥammad annulled the salvific efficacy of the Jewish and Christian covenants. Eternal salvation required acceptance of Islam, and this by definition included recognizing the status of Muḥammad as the Seal of the Prophets. Sayyid Ahmad, however, rejects the supersession inherent in this position. He does not affirm the view that one prophet annuls the authority of another, or that the latest prophet's *sharʿīa* became the sole locus of salvation. He writes in *Tabyīn* Part 3:

> Now it must be understood that those people who believe that according to the Muslim religion (*madhhab*) the coming of the *Zabūr* (Psalms) after the *Tawrāh* (Torah), of the *Injīl* (Gospel) after the *Zabūr*, and of the Qurʾan after the *Injīl*, there is abrogation (*mansūkh*), then these are in absolute (*meḥez*) error; and if an ignorant (*jāhil*) Muslim opposes this, he

21 Troll, 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan and His Theological Critics', 262.

22 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 236.

> does not know his religion or its principles. This means that abrogation (*nāskh*) in our Muslim religion occurs in the same manner as approved (*musallam*) in all *sharīʿat* (plural) as confirmed within the Jewish *sharīʿah* and holy *Injīl*.[23]

He is incontrovertibly opposed to the idea of covenantal supersessionism. The rise of a new legislative prophet and the arrival of a new scriptural dispensation does not revoke covenantal authority or annul existing religious guidance such as that recorded in Jewish and Christian scriptures. Chronological hierarchy does not define the relationship between the legislative prophets.

This soteriology informs Sayyid Ahmad's approach to revelation in the Bible and Qur'an. He accepts that ordinances instituted in the covenants of earlier prophets remain effectual for their respective adherents. He locates supporting evidence for this position in Qur'anic verses such as Q 2:112: 'In fact, any who direct themselves wholly to God and do good will have their reward with their Lord: no fear for them, nor will they grieve'; Q 2:62: 'The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve'; and Q 3:64: 'Say, People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords'.

Universality, Sayyid Ahmad claims, is the genius of Islam. As Bashir Dar has correctly explained, monotheistic faith in Sayyid Ahmad's thinking is the original and 'universally inclusive principle' of primordial religion (*dīn*).[24] Islam transcends all historical epochs and geography boundaries, and encompasses the diverse divine manifestations. As Sayyid Ahmad states:

> Every religion has certain special rituals and creeds on account of which it is differentiated from others; and anyone who does not believe in and follow these rituals is called irreligious, though we have no right to call him so, for religion, pure and simple, is above all these rituals and formalities … and that is true Islam. One who does not believe in a prophet, *avatar*, revealed scripture, or the ritualistic formalities that are commonly regarded as mandatory (*farḍ* and *wājib*) but believes in only one God is a Muslim in the true sense.[25]

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23 TK, 3: 110. This is presented within the commentary on Matthew 5:16–20.

24 Dar, *Religious Thought*, 156. For an assessment of Sayyid Ahmad's approach as universalist, see Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements', 91.

25 Khan, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, 1: 41–42.

Islam can accommodate not only the covenants of the Jews and Christians, but also that of the many '*avatars*', a term that deliberately expands the discussion to include the proponents of India's indigenous religious traditions. The term Muslim in this gloss, in the most fundamental sense, is applicable to any monotheist. For Sayyid Ahmad, salvation is for those who believe in the One God. Belief in a particular prophet or scripture is not required.

The delineating factor in Sayyid Ahmad's soteriology is not acceptance of a particular set of laws (*sharʿīa*), but rather belief in *tawḥīd*. As he specifically clarifies in a rejoinder to ʿAlī Baksh, simple faith is sufficient. Faith, brought about through repentance and the recognition of God, places one on a path to be judged by divine mercy. Salvation is not dependent upon access to or acceptance of a particular messenger. Furthermore, to refuse a particular prophet, as in the case of the Jewish rejection of Jesus, and of the Christians and Jewish rejection of Muḥammad, is disbelief in revealed law (*kufr-i sharʿī*), but it does not impinge on salvation.[26] Belief in *tawḥīd* is of greater importance than the religious particularity demarcated by legislative ordinances (*ḥukm-i sharʿī*) and social boundaries.

In this light, one can see that Sayyid Ahmad's protracted emphasis upon the universal commonality of monotheism over and above the particularity of a religious tradition flowed out of an inclusive view of salvation. This assumption affected his attitude towards the Bible. Consider the discourse in *Tabyīn* Part 1, where he clarifies that there can be no abrogation of religious (*dīn*) ordinances instituted by 'any prophet of any age'.[27] In this context, Sayyid Ahmad is specifically concerned with the annulment of guidance given by one prophet by the words of another. When salvation is not derived from obedience to one point rather than another, but rather from the acceptance of a prophet's proclamation that 'God is One', it can be seen how these differences are important, but not decisive. This statement in Part 1 presupposes and reaffirms the rejection of a definition of abrogation and of a view of supersession that he had already penned in Part 3, where he first introduces the definition. He subsequently reaffirms this belief in Part 2 and offers the clarification that prophetic guidance provides 'refinement of morals' (*tahdhīb al-akhlāq*) for right living.[28] This position was firmly established in Sayyid Ahmad's mind, and he restated it in personal correspondence and public lectures, most notably in the 1884 Lahore lectures on the nature of Islam.[29]

26 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 212–213. Pānīpatī, *Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid*, 14: 167–170.

27 TK, 1: 109.

28 TK, 3: 240; ibid., 2: 32.

29 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 278–298, 307.

In summary, commonality within Islam as the primordial religion (*dīn*) surpasses in importance the subsequent development of particular doctrinal formulations (*madhāhib*).

As expressed in the previous chapters, the aim in *Tabyīn* is to bring Muslims and Christians together in a vigorous yet reverent examination of the Bible that would create a venue for a frank discussion of salvific narratives. A study of the Bible would allow readers with 'the right heart', as expressed in the study of Matthew, and which Sayyid Ahman further clarifies in his commentary on Genesis, 'to understand the work of God in history'.[30] Inherent in this process was also the hope that readers would recognize the way in which the Qur'an clarified and corrected erroneous interpretations (*taḥrīf maʿānī*) held by the 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*), a designation in his usage that most certainly included Muslims as well. Thus, Sayyid Ahmad hoped that, through the *Tabyīn* venture, the communities would rise above the 'Controversy' and desist from acerbic polemics. The Biblical texts, Sayyid Ahmad argues, are reliable in their present form and beneficially relevant in matters of faith if properly interpreted. Furthermore, a reverent study of the Bible could result in a similarly sympathetic approach to the Qur'an, and this might open the way for harmonious co-existence. His soteriology is shaped by an approach to knowledge, and this underpins his reading of the Bible and engagement with others. His ideas develop in conversation with the Islamic philosophical tradition, and it shapes his understanding of the prophetic experience and of how revelation was received.

5 The Prophetic Experience

As Sayyid Ahmad saw it, the world is awash with divine communication. Revelation (*waḥy*) is ever-present in creation. Every creature contains a nature (*wadīʿat-i fitrat*), or otherwise stated, a natural inspiration (*ilhāmāt-i ṭabʿī*) that is a form of divine revelation (Q 16:68).[31] Divine revelation can be deciphered and articulated. Inspired persons receive revelation through intuition, dreams and visions. Some can announce sacred sayings (*teḥdīs*), but others can articulate the words of God (*kalām ilāhī*). This latter group is differentiated from the former by their character (*malaka*) and are known as prophets (*anbiyāʾ*). These are enabled to receive revelation, whether by sermon, precept or other

30 TK, 1: 30.

31 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 184.

measure.[32] Thus, the recipients of prophetic guidance, are an exalted category from among those who are endowed with revelation.

Sayyid Ahmad set out in *Tabyīn* definitions and categories to describe prophetic revelation that must be understood in order to grasp the nuance of his thought. Before analysing these, however, it is vital to recognize some helpful clarifications provided in his final writings in *Tafsīr*. Here, Sayyid Ahmad attempts to describe how revelation, that which proceeds from the Creator, becomes expressed in creation. His excursus in *Tafsīr* to account for the contingency of the Qur'an, or the process by which revelation was received and became recorded within the human realm, provides vital information for understanding Sayyid Ahmad's framework.

It is crucial to grasp the psychological complexity Sayyid Ahmad applies to the revelatory experience. He explains the encounters, whether with an angel or spiritual being, as projections of the imagination. Muḥammad's reception of verbatim divine revelation (*waḥy matlū alfāẓ*) occurred in this manner. 'The conscience becomes like a mirror outside of the self by which God's message comes forth from what is already naturally implanted within'.[33] Fully cognizant of the sensitivity of this subject, Sayyid Ahmad immediately appeals for support to his '*shaykh*' Aḥmad Sirhindī, who was indeed a revered master in this context and to all of India's Naqshbandis. He quotes Sirhindī as having stated, 'what one sees cannot be God but can only be a projection of the seer himself'.[34] If God is utterly transcendent and eternally beyond time and space, the idea of a physical encounter with God is preposterous. 'We cannot see God on the Day of Judgement; for how can He who is above space and time be visible to eyes?' According to Sayyid Ahmad's rendition of Sirhindī, God (the essence) does not intrude into the cosmos, but rather operates (attributively) within the order of creation to provide revelation through the imaginative senses.[35] This is an outworking of Ibn Sīnā's (d. 1037) writings on psychology as recorded in *Kitāb al-Shifā'*. Ibn Sīnā explained that hypnosis and trance-like states (*waham*) were so profoundly affective that patients were often unable to differentiate them from actual physical events. Sayyid Ahmad understands Muḥammad's experience of the Qur'an in that way. The revealed message was not external to creation. Knowledge was already present in the very substance of creation. What Sayyid Ahmad is attempting to describe, and what

32 TK, 1: 12–13.

33 TQ, 3: 204–208. Reference is made to Sirhindī, Letters III, 90.

34 Ibid., 204.

35 Fazlur Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 98–99. For an extensive description, see Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 89–116.

he understands to have been the established view of the great thinkers of his tradition, was that the descent (*nuzūl*) of the 'word of God' to a prophet, as recounted in the Bible and the Qur'an, was not a move from the heavenly to the physical realm, but rather from the subconscious to the conscious in the prophet's mind.

One reason for this can be derived from his cosmology, a subject of intense and continued scrutiny in his context as noted in Chapter 2. Shāh Walī Allāh, for example, ascribed to a complex system of intermediary realms (*ʿālam-i mithal*) that exist and operate beyond earthly experience. Revelation, in this view, descends from the guarded tablet (*lawḥ maḥfūẓ* or *umm al-kitāb* Q 85:21, 43:4, 56:77–78) through these realms and into human history. Sayyid Ahmad rejects the possibility of interchange between this physical world and any other realm. As Bashir Dar has summarized it, Sayyid Ahmad 'ridicules the idea of revelation from above'.[36] The fullness of divine revelation is present within creation.

The content of revelation, including the 'word of God', was implanted in the world at creation. All attainable divine knowledge is already ingrained in the human makeup, and thus revelation is already implanted within. Sayyid Ahmad posits that all divine revelation (*waḥy*), including the 'word of God' (*kalām ilāhī*), articulated by the prophets was already inherent in the human being. Because of the hermetic seal that is logically required in order to preserve the utter otherness of the divine essence, any language in scripture referring to such a crossing over must be understood figuratively. This was clear to the exalted prophets. They understood this but could not express it plainly because their respective communities had not developed sufficiently to digest this truth.

It is also vital to note that in Sayyid Ahmad's understanding, the potential for the prophetic lies within all persons. Prophets are physiologically undifferentiated from other persons, but are naturally endowed with a refined constitution and greater sensitivity for this function. These individuals learn how to decipher knowledge, and in doing so attune their prophetic character (*malaka*). Once developed, however, their distinctiveness is such that they become to other humans what 'humans are to other animals'.[37] Spiritual faculties become increasingly attuned as the prophetically endowed progress through elevated stages of awareness and refinement. The prophet learns to dialogue with his conscience as with another person, and thus to not only discern revelation but

36 Dar, *Religious Thought*, 138; Md. Imamuddin Gujrati, ed. *Sir Syed ki akhri mazaneen* (Lahore: Rafah-i Åm Press, 1893), 91–92.

37 TQ, 1: 26.

also to hear and even articulate the 'word of God'. In Sayyid Ahmad's view, as Dar explains, the prophetic 'experience, by whatever name it may be called, and whatever grades it may be divided into, is nothing but the product of one's imagination'.[38] The revelation experience is a sensual experience in which the projection of the imagination allows for God's implanted word to be identified.

This account of the revelatory experience proceeds from a figurative interpretation of the Qur'an that is consistent with Sayyid Ahmad's hermeneutical principles. Accounts of supernatural phenomena, he argues, must be understood figuratively. Thus, Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) and the Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*), described in the Qur'an as the bearers of revelation, are not to be read literally but rather symbolically. The form is perceived imaginatively through the Prophet's heightened psychological state. What appeared to be an angelic being was in actuality a manifestation of the subconscious. Sayyid Ahmad likens the experience to looking at a reflection in a mirror. The Prophet saw the reflected image of the personified conscious. He communicated with the image and talked as with another person, in a way consistent with accounts of Muḥammad's experiences. But this was not a second person, or an envoy from the beyond, but rather it was the verbalization of knowledge garnered through the development of divine attributes within him. How this occurs, Sayyid Ahmad reflects, and how recorded scripture remains universally applicable across epochs, is beyond current human knowledge, although he predicts that, over time, this too will be better understood.

Sayyid Ahmad discloses a view of revelation that was likely shared – in varying degrees – by leading pre-modern Mujaddidī thinkers in India and across the Persianate world. For many twenty-first-century readers, this account may sound aberrantly speculative, and more likely the product of post-Enlightenment European influence rather than of indigenous Muslim thinking. However, as Fazlur Rahman has convincingly argued, these august Mujaddidī thinkers were at the heart of Muslim orthodoxy in India. It must be recalled that the writings of Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh predate Indian awareness of European psychoanalysis and carried forward Ibn Sīnā's ideas of emanative psychology that considered at length how sensory and rational faculties could enable the intellect to decipher what remained unintelligible to others.[39] As noted in Chapter 2, there were diverse perspectives on the process of revelation and there was active discussion on the uniqueness of the Qur'an and the nature of Muḥammad, and the manner in which the Qur'an was received. Sayyid Ahmad's quest to reconcile recorded revelation (*naql*) and

38 Dar, *Religious Thought*, 138.

39 Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, 98–99.

reason (*ʿaql*) had a strong precedent in this context, and it proceeded along a channel already cut by eminent Muslim thinkers.[40]

Sayyid Ahmad's description of revelation opens a window on pre-modern Mujaddidī conceptions of the prophetic revelatory experience. Shāh Walī Allāh features frequently in Sayyid Ahmad's writings as the measure of orthodoxy and on most occasions, is appealed to in order to strengthen Sayyid Ahmad's argument. Discussion on the revelation of the Qur'an, however, marks one of the rare occasions where he directly contradicts the Delhi sage. Indeed, Sayyid Ahmad takes Shāh Walī Allāh to task for purportedly describing the revelation in the Qur'an as having been received as purport (*maḍmūn*). Shāh Walī Allāh posited that Muḥammad did not receive actual words verbatim and then transcribe them as Qur'an. Rather, the Prophet rationally articulated the inspired 'purport' in his own words. The claim is astounding, for it fractures the more established designation of the Qur'an as verbatim revelation (*waḥy matlū alfāẓ*). According to Sayyid Ahmad's reading, Shāh Walī Allāh, one of the most important figures in pre-modern Indian Islam, understood the Qur'an to have been formulated consciously and deliberately by Muḥammad. Though one does not claim that this is a definitive statement of Walī Allāh's position, the possibility of his writings being interpreted in this way is noteworthy. He would not be the first or the last to hold this view. Direct verbatim speech, as the Muʿtazilīs posited, blurred the distinction between the created and the uncreated, and so logically necessitated an anthropomorphic understanding of God.[41] Regardless of his personal conclusion, Walī Allāh was familiar with this line of reasoning, and cognisant of their insistence that *tawḥīd* requires that revelation be indirect speech (*ḥikāya*). Though Sayyid Ahmad's challenge requires careful disambiguation – and even if Sayyid Ahmad was wrong – the possibility raised by his argument opens a window into pre-modern theology that deserves consideration in future research.

Let us consider Sayyid Ahmad's view in greater detail. He posits that the Prophet interacted with the imagined form of his reflected conscience. In this state, he heard messages in comprehensible Arabic. Thus, divine knowledge implanted within the Prophet's being was called forth by God's 'indestructible' (to use Vitali Naumkim's term) will at the right time and in accordance with eternal wisdom.[42] If only the purport (*maḍmūn*) were received in this

40 Boer, "Aḳl', in *EI*[2].

41 Daniel A. Madigan, 'Revelation and Inspiration', in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00174 (accessed 5 April 2021).

42 Vitali Naumkin, "Ghazali et Miracle" *Ghazali*: La Raison et le Miracle (Paris: Editions Maisoneuve et Larose, 1987), 124.

heightened stated, as Shāh Walī Allāh claimed, a subsequent intellectual process would be required to compose the message, and this view was unacceptable to Sayyid Ahmad. The message was not thought up and formed through effort. That which was recited and later transcribed in the Qurʾan's codices was experienced aurally, in the ear of the mind. There are important correlations between Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation and his understanding of the present transcript (*nuskha*) of the Qurʾan, which will be discussed below, but a complementary note must first be made to prepare the way.

6 Differentiating the Rehearsed and the Unrehearsed

It becomes clear that there was detailed discussion on the contingency of the Qurʾan in this intellectual environment. Parallel to this, there was also discussion of the role of the Prophet in the articulation and interpretation of the revealed messages. It is important to recall that prophets not only receive revelation, but are also the first to interpret its meaning. As Sayyid Ahmad recounts, the exalted person was compelled to struggle (*ijtihād*) 'with all his might' to theologize what he heard and experienced.[43] The faithful presentation of the message amidst opposition and adversity required personal courage and conviction. The greatest difficulty, however, was the task of faithfully setting out the divine guidance. As noted in *Tabyīn* Part 2 (3.3.2), holy messengers underwent concerted training in order to overcome selfish desire (*nafs*) and to control base animal instincts (*ḥayawān*) that might hinder the holy mission. Knowledge (*ʿilm*), reason (*ʿaql*), and experience (*tajribah*) must be honed if a prophet was to exemplify guidance consistent with revelation.[44]

For Sayyid Ahmad, as with many Indian reformers in his context, defining the interrelation of Qurʾan and Sunna was a task of central concern. This was of understandable importance, given the weight of authority placed upon the example of the Prophet in establishing *sharīʿa*. Discerning which of Muḥammad's activities and preferences were normative, and which were not, was a task with far-reaching consequences for faithful practice. Otherwise stated, Sayyid Ahmad sensed a pressing need to develop a means to integrate the message of the Qurʾan and its lived interpretation as demonstrated in the Sunna. This was not a new predicament, but rather one with sustained gravity that had been gaining momentum. Like other reformers in this context, such as Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh, Sayyid Ahmad sought to circumvent

43 TK, 1: 24–25.
44 Ibid.

the traditional approach in order to rationalize the organic interrelation of Qur'an and Sunna. In his analysis, 'All recipients of revelation speak in at least three ways: inspired speech (*ilhām*), common speech (*ghayr-ilhām*), and critical struggle (*ijtihād*)'.[45] Only inspired speech pertaining to religious subjects, however, should be accepted as reliably protected from error. Because common speech remained liable to error, a mechanism was needed to differentiate between a prophet's manifold utterances.

As William Graham convincingly demonstrates in his landmark study of Divine Sayings (*Ḥadīth Qudsī*), the line between 'divine word and prophetic word' in the early centuries of Islam was not absolute.[46] The earliest sources indicate a more 'unitive' perception of prophetic authority and divine activity than is reflected in much of the literature today. He explains:

> Such a 'unitive' perception of their origins would mean that the early Muslims were less concerned with theological categories of religions guidance flowing from the prophetic-revelatory event than with seeking all possible guidance as to what Islam, 'submission' to God, involves in a post-prophetic, post-revelation world.[47]

Divine messages (*waḥy matlū*) or '*qur'āns*' were eventually compiled as Qur'an. The lived message (*Sunna*) of the Prophet and his Companions combined with Divine Sayings (*Ḥadīth qudsī*) of very similar form but which were not included in the Qur'an, provided guidance for the community. As opposed to the encyclopaedic reports compiled in Hadith, Sunna was the interpretative example distilled from what was protected from error and passed down through verifiable references. The challenge remained, however, for the faithful to distinguish the inspired message from the 'ordinary' words of the messenger. Sayyid Ahmad differentiates between inspired and ordinary speech, and notes the need through *ijtihād* to distinguish between them. Prophets themselves struggled to recognize what was worthy of imitation, and what was not.

Sayyid Ahmad again provides context for this discussion by alluding to the writings of Shāh Walī Allāh. The Delhi sage presented an elaborate and cogent theory to explain the interrelation of the message and the recipient. Walī Allāh understood that messages were revealed to Muḥammad in response to

45 Ibid.

46 William A. Graham, *Divine World and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources, with Special Reference to the Divine Saying or Ḥadīth Qudsī* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 107.

47 Ibid.

concrete situations. He saw an existential connection between history and revelation. Farid Esack summarizes Walī Allāh's view as 'God would not speak into a vacuum nor would He convey a message formed in one'.[48] According to Walī Allāh, the 'primordial ideal' became manifest in forms suitable to the recipient community. The doctrinal application (*sharīʿa*) is inherently flexible, and 'its form, beliefs and spiritual practices can adapt to a nation's customs, previous faiths, and temperaments'.[49] The ideal was made manifest in history according to the circumstances of a particular context.

Sayyid Ahmad's account of *naskh*, or the abrogation of one *sharīʿa* by another, is informed by Shāh Walī Allāh's view of the historicity of revelation. Walī Allāh likened following 'a pre-Muḥammadan religious covenant' to the giving of a child's medicine to an adult, or to giving 'yesterday's medicine for today's ailment'.[50] Sayyid Ahmad carries forward the doctor analogy but applies it differently. As explained in *Tabyīn* Part 1, God was like a wise physician who prescribes treatment according to a patient's needs. He concurs with Shāh Walī Allāh that there is an inherent flexibility in *sharīʿa* that allows for universally true principles to be applied to a particular context. He adds, however, that this flexibility allows for the continued and recurrent application of principles instituted by any prophet, or '*avatar*' throughout history.[51] *Sharīʿa*, once instituted, remains enduringly effective for its followers.[52]

7 The Inimitable Qur'an

Sayyid Ahmad's view of the Qur'an differs considerably from what is now regarded as mainstream Sunni orthodoxy. The normative position is that the Qur'an is a perfect rendition of the verbatim revelation expressed through Muḥammad. This is the belief that communication from the 'divine realm' was granted to the Prophet apart from human sense and intellect. The text is a perfect reflection of that which is eternally preserved in the heavenly realm. In this view, the message is comprehensible, but it is also beyond human comprehension. It is timeless divine speech, and it is powerful to heal, restore and ward off evil. The text in its present form is an inimitable miracle (*iʿjāz*) of eloquence (*faṣāḥa*) that no human intellect could match.

48 Esack, *The Qur'an*, 122.

49 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, 147.

50 Esack, *The Qur'an*, 122.

51 Khan, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, 1: 41–42.

52 TK, 2: 268. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Aḥkām-i ṭaʿām ahl-i kitāb* (*1868*) (Aligarh: Aligarh University Press, 2011), 11.

Sayyid Ahmad, on the other hand, proposes that the inimitable glory of the Qur'an lies foremost in the quality of its guidance. Here again we see the value of these exegetical writings as a source for discerning his views and for benchmarking their development within his thinking. Sayyid Ahmad first explores this idea in *Tabyīn*, where he concludes that 'The Qur'an's unrivalled quality consists not in its eloquence (*faṣāḥat o balaghat*) but rather in the unrivalled quality of its guidance (*be-misal hādi*)'.[53] He returns to this matter again in *Tafsīr*, in the exegesis of Q 2:23: 'If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it – enlist whatever supporters you have other than God – if you truly [think you can]'. Sayyid Ahmad presents his understanding of the miracle (*iʿjāz*) of the Qur'an in the context of this exposition. He combines this with examples from four related verses: Q 10:39; 11:16; 17:90; 28:49.[54] The Qur'an, according to his reading, made no claim to be supernaturally expressed or protected. Rather, the emphasis within the text is upon the quality of its message, not the inimitability of its eloquence. The Qur'an likens its content to 'the matchless guidance of the *Tawrāt*' (*be misāl hādī*).[55] In other words, the message is of such exquisite greatness that it is like the Torah – the gold standard of scriptural revelation – and Sayyid Ahmad again emphasizes the continuity he perceived between the Qur'anic and the Biblical scriptures. He presented the Qur'an within a continuum of other revealed texts, and as one to be regarded as exceptional primarily because of its content rather than its form.

Sayyid Ahmad's argument draws attention to the prevalence of discourse on this subject within the debates of theological scholars (*mutakallimūn*) in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. Concern with the structure (*naẓm*) of the Qur'an seems to have arisen in conjunction with discussion of the notion of miraculous inimitability (*iʿjāz*).[56] As recounted in Abdul-Raof's history of exegesis, it was of primary concern to substantiate what it was about the Qur'an that could not be imitated.[57] August thinkers such as al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013), al-Jurjānī (d. 1078) and al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868), for example, staunchly argued that it was the Qur'an's propositional meaning that is described as of unrivalled quality. They vehemently opposed the notion that persons were capable of creating verses like those of the Qur'an, but that they were prevented from this

53 TK, 1: 9.

54 TQ, 1: 27–29.

55 Ibid., 27.

56 Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Islâhî's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ân* (New York: American Trust Publications, 1986), 10.

57 Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 81.

because 'Allāh has averted their hearts and minds'.[58] In this view, the Qur'an was divinely protected, and its proponents rejected the idea that natural faculties were somehow inhibited from articulating even a single sign (*āya*) like those in the Qur'an. These theologians, along with others who were directly cited by Sayyid Ahmad such as al-Suyuṭī and al-Rāzī, found the 'inimitability' in the coherence of the lexical order of the words in the Qur'an.[59] Again Abdul-Raof writes, 'The main premise of this view is that the word order of Quranic propositions cannot be matched by human discourse'.[60]

Like these earlier proponents of a *naẓm* view of revelation (to use Abdul-Raof's term), Sayyid Ahmad rejects the idea that the glory of the Qur'an is in its eloquence (*faṣāḥat*). In his estimation, the 'miracle' of the Qur'an lay not in its inimitable eloquence, whether aesthetic or otherwise, but rather in the universality of the guidance contained in it. He differs, however, from these rationalist predecessors in that he believes the present text (*matn*) contained universal principles (*aslūb*) that are applicable in every generation. The miraculous, or should one say wondrous nature of the text is that the order (*naẓm*) – despite having been woven together from passages revealed incrementally over a period of some 23 years – contains the information necessary for the identification of the matchless guidance established by these principles. Thus, Sayyid Ahmad's explanation for the miracle (*iʿjāz*) of the Qur'an dismisses the argument from eloquence (*faṣāḥat*), and builds upon earlier explorations of coherence (*naẓm*) to posit a new but not fully developed means of accounting for the unrivalled guidance available in the Qur'an.

One again notes that Sayyid Ahmad's approach reflects the work of Delhi's great reformers. The Raḥīmiyya scholars led the way in creating vernacular translations of the foundational religious texts. Shāh Walī Allāh, for example, insisted that the meaning of the Qur'an was clear and comprehensible even to the common man among its original audience, and so should its translation be.[61] As Q 12:2 states: 'We have sent it down as an Arabic Qurʾān so that you [people] may understand'. This view echoes al-Ṭabarī's (d. 923) assertion that the interpreter should assume that the Qur'an's original audience was familiar with its language, and understood what was being recited.[62] The text was to be available in plain speech, understandable even by the uninitiated, so the

58 Ibid., 58–59.
59 Ibid., 82.
60 Hussein Abdul-Raof, *Arabic Rhetoric: A Pragmatic Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 58.
61 Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 8–14.
62 Abdul-Raof, *Schools of Qur'anic Exegesis*, 89.

translator must draw near to the context and seek to understand the message like a common listener in the day of the Prophet.

In Sayyid Ahmad's view, recourse to supernatural explanations for inimitability, or attribution to hidden mystical layers as seen in some Sufi writings, had diverted interpreters from their true task of arduous critical study that was needed for such a translation.[63] In broad terms, Sayyid Ahmad posits that the interpreter should focus greater attention on the actual Qur'anic text than on traditional reports of the events surrounding the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). The challenge for the interpreter is to draw near to the events by creating a backdrop from a myriad of vantages points outside of the text. Once the context is understood in finer detail, the meaning of the scriptural passage can be identified with greater clarity.

In this approach, access to textual sources composed in a similar context to that of the Qur'an were perceived as beneficial for accurate interpretation. One example of this can be seen in Sayyid Ahmad's analysis of the imbedded mystical letters (*muqaṭṭa'āt*, literally meaning 'shortened') in the Qur'an.[64] The meaning of these unconnected letters has vexed interpreters for centuries. They appear at the beginning of 29 suras, and are often referred to as 'openers' (*fawātiḥ*). In the absence of conclusive information regarding their meaning or purpose, some interpreters have explained that they are divine secrets known only to God. Sayyid Ahmad, however, remains unconvinced and suggests what he sees as a reasonable solution: the *fawātiḥ* are editorial markings.[65] He argues that this was a common feature in the Arabic poetry contemporary with the Qur'an. Initials and editorial signs were often added in this genre to mark where the work of one scribe ended and that of another began. This was a lexical feature, he claims, that was so common that it would have been immediately recognized by anyone even remotely familiar with the genre. The earliest sources remained silent about the *fawātiḥ* because their function was so obvious and quotidian that no explanation was required. Though the Qur'an is neither poetry nor soothsaying, it was revealed to a people of a particular culture, a culture whose quintessential genre was poetry. In this light, it is not so difficult to understand that scribes who copied the Qur'an had likely acquired their penmanship by working in the poetic genre. They were trained according to binding norms and culturally conditioned aesthetic values. It is reasonable to assume that the transcription and collation of the Qur'an followed prescribed practices that were already in use. According to Sayyid Ahmad's explanation,

63 TK, 2: 2.

64 TQ, 1: 10–12.

65 Ibid.

the apparently disjointed letters are in fact an editorial insertion to inform the reciter and listener of the progressive structure within the text. As will be taken up further below, he also theorizes that the use of these 'openers' offers information about the physical collation of the Qur'an into its present order.

Sayyid Ahmad was working in a manner consistent with the Delhi scholars mentioned above, looking for a way to reconcile the *fawātiḥ* with clear statements. The inclusion of content designed to be beyond comprehension contradicted Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of the very purpose of prophetic revelation. If prophecy was intended for guidance, it should be comprehensible, at least to the original recipient audience. He was convinced, therefore, that the meaning, or better the function of the *fawātiḥ*, would have been clear to the original audience. To find the solution, further research into the Arab literary tradition would be required, but he predicted that findings would eventually show that these letters are not mystical secrets at all, but rather markers useful for navigating the oral text. Layers added from tradition had concealed rather than clarified the pristine meaning of the Qur'an, and the task of modern interpreters is to remove these blinders.

Unfortunately, Sayyid Ahmad presents no references to support his explanation of the *muqaṭṭa'at*. The closest source we find to this is in the work of Fā'iḍ al-Ḥāsan, who was Sayyid Ahmad's teacher in Delhi. He oversaw Sayyid Ahmad's printing press during the publication of *Tabyīn* and remained affiliated with the Aligarh movement throughout his extensive tenure as the founding professor of Arabic at Lahore Oriental College. Al-Ḥāsan is widely known as a meticulous student of early Arabic poetry and his work provides a likely source for Sayyid Ahmad's theory.

It is also important to note that al-Ḥāsan was regarded as a leading Arabic scholar in his generation. He was highly revered for his studies of 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī (1260) and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505).[66] Al-Suyūṭī was one of the earliest proponents of *naẓm* as the determinant of Qur'anic inimitability. Al-Ḥāsan was well-known for his memorization (*ḥifẓ*) and virtuosity in reciting pre-Islamic Arabic verse. He was a renowned specialist in works such as *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa* and the *Dīwān* of the Prophet's Companion Ḥasan bin Thābit.[67]

66 Concerning al-Bayḍāwī, see TQ, 1: 22, 36; for al-Suyūṭī, see TK, 1: 74–75. For a more detailed examination of Sayyid Ahmad's use of Arabic sources in *Tafsīr*, see Jamshed Ahmad Nadvī, *Tafsīr Sar Sayyid ke 'Arabi masēdir* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, 2001), 18–62.

67 This is a compilation of pre-Islamic poetry gathered by Abū Tamām (ca. 942) which was a critical reading of the Tabrīzī version. See J.S., 'Dr. Freytag's Edition of the *Hamāsa*', *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies* (June, 1827): 800–806.

Sayyid Ahmad had heard al-Ḥāsan recite verses that were – to some degree – likened to those of the Qurʾan, and he regarded these as an overlooked source of cultural knowledge. The importance of al-Ḥāsan's influence will be considered in the next chapter, particularly as demonstrated in the work of Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāḥī, another scholar within Sayyid Ahmad's Aligarh constellation, and as seen in the enduring quest of his Iṣlāḥī (literally 'reformist') School to identify structural patterns within the Qurʾan.

Any discussion of the various aspects of coherence (*naẓm*), however, is inextricably related to questions about the process of the Qurʾan's codification. Sayyid Ahmad does not present a crystalized view, and this hinders an assessment of his position. It can be said with confidence, however, that Sayyid Ahmad assumes there is a cogent explanation, even if not presently demonstrable, for the manner in which revelation was received, transcribed and arranged. The arrangement of the Qurʾan could very well have been completed under the supervision of the Prophet, as Sayyid Ahmad seems to declare in the apologetic text *Life of Mohammed* published from England in 1870. However, a nuanced reading of his later writings indicates that he likely saw the role of editors and scribes in the compilation to be far more significant than is popularly assumed. He seems open to the possibility that a trusted Companion such as Ibn Masʿūd, who is referenced on at least four separate occasions in *Tafsīr*, could have played a decisive part in the transcription and arrangement of Qurʾan.[68] For reasons of his own, Sayyid Ahmad prefers not to disclose his position. Regardless, it can be inferred from his writings that he believed the process was carried out with great care and intentionality, and that its guidance remains effective today when properly read.

8 The Qurʾan as Text

The Qurʾan came into its present order under difficult circumstances. There were efforts to standardize the codex (*muṣḥaf*) during the reign of ʿUthmān, the fourth caliph, approximately twenty years after the Prophet's death. Sayyid Ahmad draws attention to the codification process in his writing by referring to the variant codices of ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd and Ubbay ibn Kaʿb,[69] which present some alternative arrangements of the Qurʾan and include textual differences beyond the standard variations in reading (*qirāʾat*). Could the order have been other than it is now? The coherence (*naẓm*) view permits this sort of

68 TQ, 2: 38, 65.

69 TK, 2: 104, 105, 107, 149, 150.

question, because it entertains the possibility of greater human participation in the process than is permitted by the miraculous eloquence position. One identifies in Sayyid Ahmad's nuanced evaluation a concern for the process of codification, and the possibility of arrangements other than the order standardized in the codex of Zayd ibn Thābit.

The text of the Qur'an, in Sayyid Ahmad's view, is authentic in present form. He provides blanket assurances of its ultimate reliability and authenticity, similar in many ways to those he offers for the authenticity of the Bible. 'Even if all manuscripts were obliterated', he asserted, 'countless villagers could write out a fresh copy, accurate down to the letter'.[70] He also clearly affirms, however, that the process of codification should be revisited in light of developments in historical knowledge. Sayyid Ahmad does not claim that the Qur'anic text is flawless. As explained in *Tabyīn* Part 1 (Discourse 8), he accepts that a text can be authentic even if it is imperfect. His view is one that allows for an ardent defence of Scripture, and a simultaneous acknowledgement that 'no ancient book is free from scribal errors. Our Qur'an is not free from such errors'.[71] Despite the tremendous care expended in preservation and reproduction, textual inconsistencies remain, if not in the letters then at least in the 'jot and tittles' of the readings (a paraphrase of *Tabyīn*).

Sayyid Ahmad is aware of the complex issues of codification, and familiar with interpretative disputes caused by divergent readings. He candidly notes that this is a problem shared by readers of the Bible too. In the exposition of Q 2:92–96 (98–102), for example, he draws attention to a word derived from the Arabic root *m-l-k*, which has been read as either *malik* or *malak*, king or angel.[72] Sayyid Ahmad's deliberation on this question is instructive. He notes that there were conflicting opinions amongst the earliest sources. *Tafsir-i kabīr* records agreement between Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Ḥāsan al-Baṣri, and Ibn Isḥāq that the correct reading is 'king' (*malik*). Standardized manuscripts, however, following the ʿUthmān codex disagree, and read the word as *malak* (angel).[73] Working within his definition of *taḥrīf* as presented in *Tabyīn*, Sayyid Ahmad explains that the matter hinges on the intention of the interpreter. There is no reason to believe that an attempt was made to conceal or pervert the text or the meaning. The difference, he concludes, is due to the absence of diacritical marks. Each interpreter sought to follow faithfully his own chain of transmission and to discern the implications of one reading rather than the

70 TK, 1: 143.
71 Ibid.
72 TQ, 1: 135. The protracted discussion continues from p. 115 to p. 137.
73 Ibid.

other. Despite their diligence, in the absence of markings, the original meaning simply could not be ascertained.

The manner in which Sayyid Ahmad resolves the discrepancy is insightful. 'I will understand it as king, but I will read it [aloud] as angel', he concludes.[74] For the good of the community, and so as not cause unnecessary strife, he prefers to guards his tongue and proceed with public recitation according to accepted tradition. He is grappling with an issue shared by many British clergy, as noted by John Henry Newman, who were concerned that the faithful should not be unduly troubled by the dissonant turbulence often experienced in critical scholarship. Newman's concern with the highly controversial 'Essays and Reviews', for example, was not necessarily due to the topics addressed, but rather with the fact that they were broadcast before the general public, and thus 'unsettling their faith without offering them anything else to rest upon'.[75] Similarly, Sayyid Ahmad was conversant with the critical issues in the Qur'an and the possible existence of variant codices, like those of Ubbay and Ibn Masʿūd. The ambiguity caused by alternate readings – *malik* or *malak* – were acceptable in his mind. These did not qualify as corruption (*taḥrīf*) because there was no malicious intent. However, if a commentator were to suppress information in order to create a veneer of conformity and to conceal ambiguity, then he would be guilty of 'very grave sin'.[76] In other words, the interpreter is guilty of *taḥrīf* if he conceals ambiguity, for in so doing he substitutes his own word and will for that of God. We shall revisit Sayyid Ahmad's use of the *taḥrīf* later in this chapter and consider some of the ramifications.

These critical issues informed Sayyid Ahmad's appeal for a new way of approaching the Qur'anic text. He warns that, in time, Muslim scholars would apply similar methods to the study of the Qur'an as Christian do to the Bible. Lest the community endure a similar shock, a new generation of scholars should see that the glory of the Qur'an is in its content, rather than in the mystical nature of its form. In *Tabyīn*, he notes that some Christians have made the Bible into an idol, and he warns Muslims lest they do the same with the Qur'an. The process of critical study is arduous, but intellectual progress demands its application; and Sayyid Ahmad believed that this intellectual jihad would ultimately demonstrate the exceeding greatness of Islam.

In this light, one can see how *Tafsīr* provides a more textured image of Sayyid Ahmad's account of prophetic revelation. It is important to recall that he held the *a priori* assumption that no interpretation was free from theological

74 Ibid.

75 Wansborough, *Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 156.

76 TQ, 1: 135.

presuppositions.[77] Both of his exegetical studies, of the Bible and the Qur'an, make it abundantly clear that the problem confronting the reader is ultimately one of interpretation. Even if there were such a thing as a perfect original manuscript, flawless and without variants, it would only remain so until read. Once revelation involves the human person – even a protected prophet – there is always the possibility of error due to human influence. The message, even if delivered verbatim and accurately recorded, only remains perfect until it enters the mind of the listener. Then the message becomes thoroughly humanized as it is mulled over, conceptualized, discussed, translated and otherwise acted upon. The Qur'an, like the Bible, is a text that cannot escape human interpretation.

Sayyid Ahmad regards the Qur'an as a product of a divinely infused world. The contents are a result of the existence of the divine in the natural. This will be examined in detail in the coming chapter, but for our purposes here, it is worth recounting that Sayyid Ahmad viewed creation as hermetically sealed – nothing comes in or goes out. The everlasting substance of the created world is infused with divine attributes. As he states in *Tabyīn* Part 2: 'If humanity were to become extinct the world will [still] continue indefinitely'.[78] The substance once created cannot be retracted. Revelation is constrained within nature by design, and it operates accordingly. If there is coherence in nature and revelation occurs in nature, then there is coherence in revelation.

The present text, however, is no less consonant with God's will because of this earthly process of manifestation. The contingency of the Qur'an is the miracle of the Qur'an. As Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'Were there no Mecca or Medina, there would be no Muḥammad. Were there no Muḥammad, there would be no Qur'an'.[79] The confluence of circumstances by which words came forth from within this person, and in this particular context, is a tangible demonstration of the manner in which the divine will operates within the created order. This is not supernatural, but it is nothing short of miraculous. Historicity does not diminish the text. The message faithfully accords with the divine will, power and justice that operate within the created universe.

This account of the Qur'an's contingency allows Sayyid Ahmad to reconcile the paradoxical variables involved in describing the manifestation of God's word in creation. He does not advocate a view of the Qur'an as eternal, uncreated or the product of supernatural activity. Yet in the same breath, he

77 TK, 1: 156.
78 TK, 2: 113.
79 TQ, 1: 29.

rejects the idea that the Qurʾan 'is authored by Muḥammad'.[80] Perhaps it is the delicacy of this subject, along with the complexity of the concepts, that can explain the absence of commentary by Sayyid Ahmad on the nature of the Qurʾan in *Life of Mohammed* as Gulfishan Khan has aptly observed.[81]

Aloys Sprenger predicted that a day would soon come when 'liberal minded Muslims' would have no problem in asserting that the Qurʾan was 'skilfully and wilfully' composed by the Prophet of Islam. He also predicted that Indian Muslims would adopt a view of revelation similar to that held by 'educated persons' in Germany who recognized scripture not as a 'Book of God' but as a human record of inspired revelation through divine communion.[82] This was the foreseen trajectory of modern Islamic scholarship. But Sayyid Ahmad does not concur. He does not subscribe to a view like Sprenger's to account for the Qurʾan's advent. Nor does he perceive his own explanation to be any less orthodox than that of his scholarly antecedents at Delhi's Madrasa Raḥīmiyya.

In short, Sayyid Ahmad did not regard himself as a heretical innovator. Rather, he firmly gauged his work as a faithful act of service to fellow believers. He believed faith could be sustained through the storms of criticism if it were enriched by the intellectual resources available in the storehouse of Islamic theology. His account of revelation proceeds along a path authorized from what he regarded as the highest echelons, from august thinkers like Aḥmad Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh. This is of tremendous importance to the study of Islam in South Asia because these are two of the most prominent early modern thinkers. They are scholars who continue to be revered today, even by Sayyid Ahmad's fiercest opponents. In Sayyid Ahmad's reading, the heirs of this scholarly tradition understood like himself that the Qurʾan was revealed through a complex process that worked within the natural world.

Sayyid Ahmad believed that he was doing a service to future generations by shedding light on the issue of revelation from within the Muslim intellectual tradition. In light of the rapid 'rise of the sciences', he found it evident that many doctrines, including the nature of the Qurʾan, would be severely tested. As he stated in the Lahore lectures in 1884:

> There is none at present who being aware of modern science and philosophy do not entertain, in his heart of hearts, doubts about the doctrines of Islam as accepted today. I am sure that with the spread of the new

80 Dar, *Religious Thought*, 148.

81 Gulfishan Khan, *Essays on Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, 2015), 108.

82 Aloys Sprenger. *The Life of Mohammad* (Allahabad: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851), 1–3.

> learning, to which end I am striving my utmost … there will appear an indifference – rather positive revulsion – towards the doctrines of Islam, though I am equally sure that these will not in the least affect the true religion of Islam.[83]

Customary explanations for religious belief and practice were being severely tested. But if the resources needed to articulate and promote 'the true religion of Islam' were publicly brought to light, religion and science could be reconciled and seen as mutually beneficial rather than as diametrically opposed.

It is important to recall that Sayyid Ahmad recognized the severity of the issues at stake. Muslims were beginning to experience the severe dissonance endured by German and British Christians through the clash of religion and science. As John Henry Newman had protested, the faith of common people was challenged and nothing provided in its place.[84] Critical scholarship was gaining ground amongst educated Muslims, and it was feared that many would lose faith. In Sayyid Ahmad's estimation, the way to mitigate the damage was to stimulate critical scholarship. His strategy was to familiarize the new generation of Muslim scholars with their own critical tradition. To do this he sought to bring to light lesser-known theological elements that were previously confined to the exclusive domain of religious specialists. He would break in order to mend.

9 Revelation Defined

In *Tabyīn* Part 1, descriptive categories are given for classifying revelation. The taxonomy applied is that used in *ʿilm al-ḥadīth*, the science of tradition, to classify the various forms of revealed knowledge (*waḥy*) found in the Qur'an and Sunna as either *matlū* or *ghayr matlū* (translation follows below).[85] This usage has been duly noted in previous research, but its highly significant implications have not been fully considered. The likely reason for this, as Aisha Musa observes, is that contemporary research on *ʿilm al-ḥadīth* tends to be concerned mostly with the authenticity rather than the authority of these traditions and this particular taxonomy is primarily used to discuss authority. Sayyid Ahmad draws from this taxonomy not to evaluate textual authenticity, but rather to invoke the authority of extra-Qur'anic revelation in Muslim

83 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 308.
84 Wansborough, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, 155.
85 Madigan, 'Revelation and Inspiration'.

faith. This construction was the means by which Sayyid Ahmad conceptualized Biblical revelation to his audience.

The history of this terminology is instructive. As introduced already in Chapter 2, the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construction is of proto-Ashʿarī (*aṣḥab al-ḥadīth*) origin, and it was coined specifically to formulate the position that the Sunna is complementary to, and legislatively equal to the Qurʾan.[86] As Daniel Brown has convincingly argued, 'The distinction made here is one of form and not of substance. The Sunna is not a different mode of revelation, but it is used differently and transmitted differently'.[87] The historical repercussions are of central importance because this became the pervasive view amongst Qurʾan interpreters and legal (*fiqh*) scholars.

The Sunna is 'organically' interrelated to the Qurʾan because it is constituted of divine revelation and is therefore of equivalent authoritative status. The component parts – the actions, preferences and statements of the Prophet of Islam – proceed from the same source as the Qurʾan and are necessary for its interpretation. The Sunna is derived primarily from the Hadith compendiums, and these compendiums function as a 'second scripture'.[88]

For most of history, the Sunna and the Qurʾan have been regarded as organically intertwined. This is somewhat similar to the interrelation of the oral and written Torah in Judaism.[89] The 'oral Torah' represents those laws and legal interpretations not recorded in the Pentateuch, which is the 'written Torah', but that are nonetheless recognized as prescriptive or 'co-given'.[90] The 'oral Torah', also known as the Talmud, differs from the 'written Torah' in the Hebrew Bible, but this is a difference of form, not of substance, and consequently not of legislative authority. This is analogous to the relationship of the Sunna to the Qurʾan. Although the possible interrelation of the approaches taken by these two communities in their respective views of revelation cannot be taken up here, it is not difficult to detect a degree of overlap in their recognition of tradition as authoritatively revelatory. Tradition informs scripture, or otherwise stated: the Sunna complements the Qurʾan.

86 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 15.

87 Ibid., 16.

88 Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 7–10.

89 Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo, *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 15–33; Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Tradition as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 3–62.

90 Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), l4.

The way in which Sayyid Ahmad systematically categorized revelation in the Qur'an and Sunna opens the way to understand his attitude towards the Bible. Indeed, failure to comprehend the specific meaning inherent in this taxonomy would gravely cloud the nuance of his approach. In order to understand his meaning, it is helpful first to clarify the most common descriptors for revelation as (1) that granted in words (*bi-l-lafẓ*) and (2) that received by subject (*bi-l-maʿnā*). The former is verbatim, the actual words are given; the second is topical (*mafhūm*) and the speaker articulates the revealed subject in his own words. In this taxonomy, the Qur'an was categorized as *bi-l-lafẓ*. Sunna on the other hand, is primarily *bi-l-maʿnā*, although it may also contain portions (known as *Ḥadīth Qudsī*) that are accepted as the verbatim word of God, but which were not to be included in the Qur'an. Sayyid Ahmad was clearly familiar with this construction as can be seen in his earliest exegetical writing found in the commentary of Matthew 1:6 in *Tabyīn* Part 3. In his subsequent writings, however, starting from Part 1, Sayyid Ahmad replaces this with the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construction, a convention that he continued to apply into his final writings in *Tafsir*.[91]

This marks a significant shift in Sayyid Ahmad's approach to conceptualizing prophetic revelation. We would argue that Sayyid Ahmad became aware of this taxonomy during the period between the completion of Part 3 of *Tabyīn* in 1860 and the composition of Part 1 in 1862.[92] Given that this shift occurred precisely when Nāyat Rasul Chīriākotī and Fā'iḍ al-Ḥāsan joined Sayyid Ahmad, it is plausible that one of them informed Sayyid Ahmad of this distinction. One can only surmise that our author became convinced that this taxonomy more clearly expressed his position and adopted it forthwith.

The implications within this shift in terminology are very important. According to Abdurraḥman Kīlānī, the *lafẓ*/*maʿnā* construction specifies an inherent inequality in which the former is greater than the latter. The reason for this priority is that the latter is liable to error because only the subject of the revelation was given, rather than the actual words. There is an inherent danger that revelation may be confused or admixed with imagination. The possibility remains – however faint – that what the Prophet spoke on a particular matter was of his own accord and not inspired by God.[93] This is a long-standing issue

91 TQ, 1: 28.

92 In Part 3, Sayyid Ahmad refers to prophetic revelation in terms of *lafẓ* and maʿnā. However, after the shift to *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* in Part 1, the *lafẓ* and *maʿnā* construct is no longer used to compare the categories of books such as the Bible and the Qur'an, but rather portions within them, as can be seen in TK, 2: 52.

93 Kīlānī, *Dafāʿ-i Ḥadīth* (Lahore: Dar al-Undalis, 1999), 21. See also Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Salafi, *Ḥujjat-i ḥadīth* (Lahore: Islamic Publishing House, 1981), 22.

among interpreters. The Muʿtazilīs, for example, resisted the exaltation of the Sunna as an interpretative source for this very reason.

Interpreters faced a dilemma, namely that the authority of the Sunna would be indisputable if only there were a means to ascertain with certainty that it had been authentically recorded.[94] This was a matter of great concern in the days of Sayyid Ahmad, and Shāh Walī Allāh before him, and it continues to be a pressing issue today.[95] In the main, the *lafẓ*/*maʿā* taxonomy reflects recognition that the Sunna is open to error, but that the Qurʾan is not. This results in a differentiation between the authority attributed to each of them. This difference, however, is not inherent in the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construction, which was crafted specifically to counteract the Muʿtazilī view and to enhance the authority of the Sunna by affirming its status as revelation equal in authority to that of the Qurʾan. Although care is needed to grasp the nuanced significance of Sayyid Ahmad's application of the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy, its identification, as we shall see, provides a cogent explanation for his view of the Bible, and his particular reading of Q 2:136: 'We make no distinction between any of them', that is displayed prominently in the masthead of *Tabyīn*. In short, the reasoning Sayyid Ahmad sets out to legitimize a serious Muslim reading of the Bible was based on the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* paradigm. He applies this semiotic construct to the Biblical scriptures, in much the same way as the Ashaʿrīs had done in order to authorize revelation in the Hadith.

Let us look more closely at these descriptive categories. The tern *matlū* is derived from the Arabic root *t-l-w*, which denotes the reading of the text not only for didactic comprehension, but also to convey the acoustic experience of hearing the transcendent words of God.[96] The latter is regarded as a spiritually beneficial and meritorious exercise. In its usage today, this term for reading aloud (*tilāwa*) is applied specifically to the recitation of the Qurʾan. Earlier expositors, however, understood the term in a less mysterious manner. This is quite clearly seen in the account of Imām Rāghib Isfahānī (d. 1108), the compiler of a standard expository dictionary used in South Asia. He defined *tilāwa* as: 'To proceed in uninterrupted succession, whether of person, principle, or word'.[97] The message is carried forward to incite others to believe and obey (*ittibāʿ*) that which is recited. However, unlike many modern interpreters, Imām Rāghib clarified that the term *tilāwa* was not limited to recitation of

94 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 15.

95 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 34.

96 Neal Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 17–29.

97 Imām Rāghib Isfahānī, *Al-Mufradāt fī gharīb al-Qurʾān*, trans. Muhammad Abdahu Ferozpuri (Lahore: Islami Academy, 1987), 147.

the Qurʾan, but rather included the 'before books' as well. He demonstrated this by providing an example drawn from Q 2:121 (126), a passage that refers specifically to the *tāwrat* (Torah). In this light, it can be seen that *tilāwa* is not defined by what is being recited, whether Qurʾan or Torah, but rather by the act itself, namely, a liturgical and worshipful repetition performed to stimulate belief and promote religious fidelity. This is precisely Sayyid Ahmad's point: *waḥy matlū* is a technical term that denotes revelation rehearsed for recitation. The Qurʾan and Sunna are similar in substance because they are by definition revelation; however, they differ in form and in function. The former is to be rehearsed within the liturgical regimens, the latter provides instruction and historical context, but does not form part of the private or corporate worship experience. Sayyid Ahmad extended these categories to revelation recorded in the Bible.

Perhaps building upon Imām Rāghib's definition, or a similar source, Sayyid Ahmad underscores the point that *tilāwa*, as a descriptive qualifier of prophetic revelation, was indicative of function rather than of nature. Hence, the category of *waḥy matlū* was not limited to oracles. Whereas some might say that this category can only refer to verbatim revelation, whether found in the Sunna or the Qurʾān, Sayyid Ahmad claims that this is not consistent with the original definition. He argues that *waḥy matlū* is not limited to verbatim revelation because traditional commentators applied a subsequent distinction, the sub-categories of *waḥy matlū maḍmūn* (subject) and *waḥy matlū alfāẓ* (words). The Hadith of Gabriel, for example, as recounted by ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, was regarded as verbatim revelation, or *waḥy matlū alfāẓ*.[98] This was practically indistinguishable in style and content from passages in the Qurʾan and – like many other statements recorded in Hadith – it has provided a textual basis for elements that are not made explicit in the Qurʾan. In summary, the meaning of *matlū* was not limited to whether the revelation was given as word or subject, but rather it was indicative of liturgical function. *Waḥy matlū* referred on occasion to verbatim revelation, but also to messages formulated by a prophet in response to an inspired subject.

The second definition that requires attention is *ghayr matlū. Ghayr* means other than, and defines the second form of revelation as not *matlū* (not given verbatim). The construction was coined to describe the Sunna as extra-Qurʾanic revelation. For some, such as Shāh Walī Allāh, this was limited to occasions when Muḥammad specified that his statement was revelation,

98 Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *Vision of Islam* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2006), xxii. The Hadith of Gabriel is considered by many Muslim scholars to be a foundational text for it presents, in a comprehensive way, many of the central beliefs of the faith.

which can range from fewer than twenty to several hundred. For others, such as al-Ghazālī, *waḥy ghayr matlū* was simply synonymous with Sunna. He explained, 'On occasions God indicates his Word by the Qur'an, on others, by words in another style, not publicly recited, and called *Sunna*'.[99] The most basic difference is one of function: *waḥy ghayr matlū* is revealed knowledge not intended for liturgical recitation. Though different in form and function, it was nonetheless revelation.

As with *matlū*, there are inherent implications that accompany the term *ghayr*. It is readily found in Urdu sociolinguistics to indicate that which is outside, beyond or unfamiliar. An unknown tongue (including a heavenly tongue, or glossolalia) is *ghayr zabān*, that which is beyond one's knowledge is *ghayr ʿilm*, and a foreign national is *ghayr qom*. The usage readily establishes a dialectical opposite that delineates between what is familiar, or 'our own', and that which is foreign, lacking or even aberrant. To the present-day reader, the term immediately brings to mind a priority of one over the other, the primary over the secondary, the good over the bad, the familiar over the foreign. But this was not inherent in either the lexical meaning or the taxonomy's technical application. Imām Rāghib again comes to our aid. He removed some of the confusion pertaining to the meaning of the term by contrasting *ghayr* with *mukhtalifūn*. The former he rendered as 'another', the latter as 'different', or 'other'. That which is *ghayr* shares the same substance (*jawhar*) as that which it qualifies.[100] This is not the case with the second term. That which is *mukhtalif* is always *ghayr*, but that which is *ghayr* is not always *mukhtalif*. It is a matter of substance. Both *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* are *waḥy*, and therefore, share the same substance. *Ghayr* refers to 'another' kind of revelation, rather than what is 'other' than revelation. This distinction opens a new way to understand Sayyid Ahmad's argument. He capitalizes on the fact that Sunna is revelation. In other words, the content, which is drawn primarily from the words of Muḥammad, is recognized to be of exceeding authority despite the way it differs from the Qur'an in form and function.

To recap, Sayyid Ahmad first applies the *maltū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy in *Tabyīn* Part 1, Discourse Four, to describe revelation in the Bible and this then becomes the standard terminology he uses when he discusses revelation, rather than *lafẓ*/*maʿāni*, which he applied earlier in Part 3. Sayyid Ahmad builds upon

99 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 18; Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 40. In assessing the meaning of *waḥy matlū*, traditional commentators have often drawn on the differentiation made in Q 62:2 between 'the Qur'an and Wisdom' to give Qur'anic affirmation to the extra-Qur'anic inspiration observed in the Prophet's customary behaviour.

100 Isfahānī, *Al-Mufradāt*, 772–774.

the knowledge, as evidenced in Q 2:121, that the term *tilāwa* is applicable to the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The benefit of this construction is that it avoids a hierarchical ranking of the sacred texts. By describing Biblical revelation according to this taxonomy, distinguishing between what is intended for liturgical recitation and what is not, Sayyid Ahmad identifies a parity that is somewhat similar to the organic unity of the Qurʾan and Sunna. He draws on hermeneutical resources within the history of Islamic thought to establish a level ground on which these sacred testimonies could interact. Despite differences in form, revelation is authoritative because of its substance. Sayyid Ahmad is not concerned in *Tabyīn* with addressing in detail the miraculous nature of the Qurʾan or the transcendent experience of the worshiper, or the authenticity of the Hadith canon. He considers each of these in due time, but the aim in this first application of the taxonomy is to establish a rationale for why the Bible requires 'prayerful' consideration by Muslims. The *lafẓ*/*maʿāni* distinction elevates the authority of one mode above the other. The *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construction insists on their equality.

10 Sources for the Adoption of the Taxonomy

Sayyid Ahmad's application of this taxonomy calls for renewed attention to the textual resources available in his context. Christian Troll has drawn attention to William Muir's role in stimulating Sayyid Ahmad's study of historiography in general, and of the collection of Hadith in particular. This correlation, however, cannot account for the adoption of this taxonomy. Muir was preoccupied with the authenticity rather than the authority of Hadith. One of the central arguments in Muir's *Life of Mohamet* (1858–1861) was that the extant biographies were more historically reliable than the Hadith compilations. Muir made no reference at all, however, to the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy. Sayyid Ahmad was doubtless offended by Muir's study, but neither this work nor that of any European can account for his appropriation of this paradigm from *ʿilm al-Ḥadīth*.

One can only speculate about the sources that informed Sayyid Ahmad's adoption of this taxonomy. Al-Shāfiʿī is credited with preparing the foundation for the acceptance of 'dual revelation' as normative in Islam.[101] He argued that Sunna is *waḥy* and that Hadith is the unique source of Muḥammad's Sunna. As Aisha Musa concludes, al-Shāfiʿī was the first to attribute the status of scripture

101 Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 2. See *Naskh al ḥukm dūna al-tilāwa* in John Burton, *The Collection of the Qurʾan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 53.

to selected Hadiths.[102] The taxonomy was used in several works available to Sayyid Ahmad, such as *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* by Ibn ʿArabī, *Uṣūl fakhr al-Islām* by al-Bazdawī, *Naẓm al-durar* by al-Biqāʿī and *Al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām* by Ibn Ḥazm.[103] Another plausible source of influence could have been a reading of Ibn Saʿd's *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* (Book of the Major Classes).[104] Ibn Saʿd was known as the 'scribe' (*kātib*) of al-Wāqidī, whose *sīra* (*Kitāb al-Maghāzī*) was central to William Muir's *The Life of Mahomet*.[105] In this compendium of biographies, Ibn Saʿd (d. 845) recounted early Muslim acceptance of multiple Sunna reports as sources of religious authority. The text also noted the reluctance of ʿUmar (d. 644), the second caliph, to record the traditions of the Prophet lest they somehow obscure, or 'clothe' the Qurʾan.[106] The view presented in *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* is that Muḥammad's Sunna – though greatly esteemed – was 'simply one among several potential sources of religious authority'.[107] The text recounted a broader range of interpretative sources than what later crystalized. Regardless of his sources, Sayyid Ahmad carried forward the construction to argue that the Sunna was established not only from Hadith, but also from Christian and Jewish sources.[108] The Sunna of Muhammad, after all carried forward the existing Sunna of Abraham, recalled every year with a sacrifice. Not to speculate too much, but Sayyid Ahmad made frequent use of the term *ṭabaqāt* in *Tabyīn* Part 1 (1862) and in the Calcutta lectures of 1863, the period when his adoption of the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy is first recorded. It was in these lectures that Sayyid Ahmad first articulated the need for a new theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*) by drawing on the compendium (*muṭābaqāt*), the many layers of Islamic exegesis and natural philosophy.

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102 Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 14.

103 For a contemporary example in South Asia, see Salafi, *Hujjat-i ḥadīth*; and Kīlānī, *Dafāʿi ḥadīth*.

104 George Makdisi, '"Ṭabaqāt"-Biography: Law and Orthodoxy in Classical Islam', *Islamic Studies* 32, no. 4 (1993): 371–396.

105 Alan M. Guenther, 'Response of Sayyid Aḥmad Ḫān to Sir William Muir's Evaluation of Ḥadīṯ Literature', *Oriente Moderno* 21 (82), no. 1 (2002): 219–254.

106 Musa, *Hadith as Scripture*, 22.

107 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 10; G.H.A. Juynboll, 'Some New Ideas on the Development of Sunna as a Technical Term in Early Islam', in idem (ed.), *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Hadith* (Ashgate: Variorum, 1996), 101. This is based on Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabir*, ed. E. Sachau, 9 vols (Leiden: Brill, 1904–1940), 3/1: 243.

108 Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (Hamiduddin Farahi) translated selection from *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā* into Persian during his student days at Aligarh at Sayyid Ahmad's request. The selections were incorporated into the collage syllabus in 1891.

11 Construction Applied to the Bible

Revelation in the Qur'an is by definition *waḥy matlū*. This form, however, is not unique to the Qur'an. There are examples of *waḥy matlū* in the 'wisdom' spoken by Muḥammad, and Sayyid Ahmad identifies multiple passages in the Bible that he also places in this category. To summarize, *waḥy matlū* is subdivided into two further categories: that revealed by subject (*maḍmūn*), and that revealed in precise words (*alfāẓ*). One distinction of the Qur'an is that it contains solely *waḥy matlū alfāẓ*. *Waḥy matlū* recorded in the Bible, in Sayyid Ahmad's assessment, is primarily *waḥy matlū maḍmūn*. Hence, the primary distinction between the *waḥy matlū* found in the Bible and that found in the Qur'an is that the former contains the 'pure subject spoken by God' (*khālis maḍmūn jo khudā ne kahā*) and the latter the 'pure words spoken by God' (*khālis alfāẓ jo khudā ne kahā*).[109] These are similar but different. The immediate question is whether this distinction makes one superior to the other.

Sayyid Ahmad anticipated this question and resolutely denies a hierarchical difference. In his application, the two are of equal value. He clarifies this in no uncertain terms in *Tabyīn* Part 1, Discourse Three, by stating, 'God protect us [from Satan] (*Naʿudhbillāh*)! The revelation of the earlier (*sābiqīn*) prophets is no less than that which was granted to the Prophet Muḥammad'.[110] He then specifies that Muslims must not qualify *matlū* revelation as of greater worth than *ghayr matlū* because they are both of divine origin and of 'equal value in matters of religion' (*dīn ke muʿāmale main, donon barābar hain*).[111] This is the clearest statement found in his works on the value of Biblical revelation in relation to the Qur'an. He further specifies that, 'Matters of religion (*dīn ke muʿāmale*) include inspired commands (*alqā*), precepts (*aḥkām*) and salvific guidance (*hidāyat*)'.[112] Whatever has been prophetically revealed, whether in word or subject, is of equivalent value and benefit to its followers.

Sayyid Ahmad's emphasis on the commonality of these scriptures is most strongly affirmed in his assertion that revelation was characteristically *ghayr matlū* before the advent of the Qur'an. The vast majority of texts regarded as sacred scripture by monotheistic communities do not claim to have been received as verbatim revelation and 'To not understand this,' Sayyid Ahmad quipped, 'is to blind oneself to the history of revelation'.[113] In short, the Qur'an

109 TK, 3: 249.
110 TK, 1: 24.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 22, 31.

was the exception rather than the rule among revealed texts. Revelation other than the Qur'an, as found in the Bible and Sunna, is almost entirely *ghayr matlū*.[114] This is a bold statement that illustrates the stark contrast between the position of Sayyid Ahmad and that of many of his co-religionists. Kenneth Cragg has described a prevalent view, which he regarded as a circular argument, namely that all revelation must conform to the structure and style of the Qur'an (*matlū alfāẓ*) in order to be recognized as authentic.[115] Sayyid Ahmad, however, was diametrically opposed to this logic. Consider for example his statement in the introduction to the Old Testament in Part 2:

> Without this history, the world would be in darkness, not knowing where it came from or to where it is going. In the first page of this book, a child may learn more in an hour, than all the philosophers in the world learned without it in a thousand years.[116]

The Qur'an did not appear in a vacuum, and there is benefit to be gained by the interpreter from a serious reading of the Biblical text, in which there is also knowledge essential for the 'philosophers' and inquisitive thinkers who seek to harmonize natural and scriptural revelation.

12 Revelation Recorded

Sayyid Ahmad provides another set of descriptive terms to categorize prophecy found within scripture. He again applies tools from the study of traditions to qualify recorded prophecy as either text (*matn*) or narrative (*riwāyat*). *Matn* refers to the content or 'backbone' of what was reported and eventually written down. *Riwāyat* describes the contextual information included within the narration.

Sayyid Ahmad's use of these descriptors is tremendously nuanced and requires careful observation. The whole of the Qu'ran is classified as *matn*. Contextual information supplied within a sura remains inseparably part of the *matn* because there is only one voice in the text, that of God. This is a unique feature of the Qur'an as rehearsed revelation (*matlū alfāẓ*). The Biblical scriptures, however, contain an interwoven blend of text and narration, or *matn* and *riwāyat*. According to Sayyid Ahmad, *matn* is the word of God (*kalām ilāhī*)

114 Ibid., 31.
115 Kenneth Cragg, *Call of the Minaret*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 27–28.
116 TK, 2: 30.

that was inspired by 'pure subject' (*khālaṣ maḍmūn*). The *matn* is accompanied by contextualizing narrative, *riwāyat*.[117] The disambiguation of these terms is essential to comprehend our author's meaning.

To demonstrate his classification, Sayyid Ahmad proposed a printing of the Bible where the *matn* was presented in 'red letter'. His idea predated what eventually became a popular trend in Christian publishing following Louis Klopsch's 1901 edition. In Klopsch's version, quotations of direct speech attributed to God or Jesus were printed in red. Despite the ironic similarity of a 'red letter' edition, Klopsch's approach did not reflect what Sayyid Ahmad had in mind. In order to understand the difference, it is vital to grasp that *matn* and *matlū* are not synonymous.[118] Sayyid Ahmad did not propose to print in red the oracle (*matlū*) portions where God – or God incarnate – spoke directly. Rather, Sayyid Ahmad explains that the *matn* in the Bible is a blend of *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* revelation. The *matn*, that is the pericopes that form the backbone of scripture, often contain a blend of these two forms. Interestingly, this is consonant with the philological meaning of the word 'text' in the Judeo-Christian interpretative tradition. The word 'text' means woven, and that is precisely the manner in which words form phrases, and these phrases become passages and books. Inherent in the term is the understanding that words and phrases are woven to create the record. Sayyid Ahmad differentiated the 'backbone' of the revealed message from the work of 'sacred historians' (*muqadas mu'arrikh*) who supplied the context through additional information and theological commentary.[119]

If this clarification were not made, it would appear that Sayyid Ahmad advocated an approach similar to that taken by Ram Mohan Roy. In *The Precepts of Jesus*, Roy excerpts Jesus's ethical statements and presents them as the true 'text', regarding the remaining New Testament material as contextualizing narrative and thus of secondary importance. But this clearly was not the intention

117 Ibid., 349.

118 It is difficult to ascertain from where Sayyid Ahmad derived the idea, but one observes that *Kitāb al-Ṭābaqat al-shāfiyya* consulted in the Aligarh archives effectively uses red ink for emphasis. The dual tone printing in it – red and black – was unique among Sayyid Ahmad's volumes consulted for this research.

119 There have been remarkable developments in the study of literary criticism in the past century, and this has produced knowledge that simply was not available in Sayyid Ahmad's day. It would have been interesting to note his response to the assumption that texts, such as the Book of Isaiah or the Book of Revelation, were compiled by a community of writers. The Book of Revelation is attributed to the Apostle John but many scholars argue that it was compiled by his disciples, or the School of John. If Sayyid Ahmad could understand divine sovereignty to have protected the 'sacred historians' in earlier compositions, might he also have extended this in contemplation of a 'School of Muḥammad'?

of Sayyid Ahmad. In fact, this is precisely the objection raised by Sayyid Ahmad against Bishop John Colenso (d. 1883) in the conclusion of *Tabyīn* Part 2. There he writes:

> But it is a great blunder and absurdity to take this narrative-matter (*riwāyat*) in the Bible for mere tales and legends … to make this assertion and still to acknowledge the Bible to contain the divine and eternal are two things so opposed to each other that they can never be reconciled.[120]

Colenso challenged the scale of the flood of Noah as part of a larger effort to demythologize portions of the Bible, particularly those that contradict the geological record. Although Sayyid Ahmad similarly sought to reconcile the perceived differences between religion and science, he refused to attribute error to the text or its compilers. He directly opposed any attempt to excise or devalue any portion of the text and understood – perhaps intuitively – that the narrative material provided essential context, and that the manner in which these words were put together, their *naẓm*, was somehow part of the prophetic genius that manifested the work of God in the word.

Some studies have overlooked the importance of this literary aspect of Sayyid Ahmad's approach to scripture. Bashir Dar, for example, though he notes the use of the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy, did not adequately examine the nuanced implications inherent in it. One result of this is that Dar presumes that Sayyid Ahmad regarded the *matn* content as of greater value than the *riwāyat*. Dar overlooked the distinction made between *matn* and *riwāyat*. In essence, he misrepresented Sayyid Ahmad's position as one of concurrence with, rather than a correction of Colenso. From Dar's assessment, Sayyid Ahmad basically affirmed the general belief that the original Gospel (*Injīl*) was a single book sent down to Jesus in a manner similar to the way the Qur'an was received by Muḥammad. It is generally accepted that there have been more than 124,000 prophets, and that some among these received a book, as referred to in the Qur'an as *kitāb* or *ṣaḥūf*.[121] It is believed that Jesus, David, and Moses received books similar to the Qur'an, most probably in the Arabic language, but that these were not preserved in their original state and have been degraded to their present forms. Dar's reading of Sayyid Ahmad reflects this view. In this light, it can be understood more clearly how Dar, along with many other readers, would assume that a collection of statements attributed

120 TK, 2: 248.

121 Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 53–79.

to Jesus would allow for the partial reconstruction of the original book granted from heaven. Dar took *matn* to be equivalent to revelation, and *riwāyat* to be basically editorial jetsam. Sayyid Ahmad, however, made it perfectly clear that this was not his view at all.

Sayyid Ahmad provides a careful explanation for his application of these terms to the Bible. He insists that *riwāyat* and *matn* are complementary elements. *Riwāyat* is what the 'sacred historian' (*muqaddas mu'arrikh*) included out of necessity when transcribing and weaving the oral tradition into the received document.[122] This was the process through which the spoken became the written, how the portions became books, and how books became the Bible. As Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'God's word (*kalām ilāhī*) when it is *ghayr matlū* contains both narrative (*riwāyat*) and text (*matn*). To not understand this is to blind oneself to the history of revelation'.[123] As asserted in *Tabyīn* Part 2, it would be an 'absurd blunder to take this narrative-matter in the Bible for mere tales and legends and a mixture of human frailty and ignorance'.[124] Biblical revelation includes both divine and human voices, and Sayyid Ahmad regards this combination as intrinsic to prophetic revelation. This combination is not adulteration or corruption, but rather it the historical norm for recorded revelation among those who follow the religion of Abraham (*millat-i Ibrāhīm*). The contextualizing narrative is part of the God-inspired (*ilhām*) text.

It is important to see that Sayyid Ahmad recognizes narrative material as vital for scriptural interpretation. Whether the content was revealed as 'pure subject' (*khālaṣ maḍmūn*) or word (*kalām*), the absence of accurate contextual information would abandon the text to conjectural speculation. Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'Unlike the Qur'an, earlier (*sābiqīn*) texts include extensive narrative material (*riwāyat taghbīr*) that facilitates interpretation of the Bible by the Bible'.[125] The blend of *riwāyat* and *matn* is complementary: it brings out the internal logic of a passage that is instrumental for the interpreter.

As emphasized in the previous chapter, Sayyid Ahmad's hermeneutical approach evidences a keen appreciation of literary structure. Perhaps due to his youthful experimentation with the mechanical sciences, or to his participation in the translation of many manuals into Urdu, our author assumed a high degree of logical order in the universe. It would be logically consistent to assume that a divine being who established order in the cosmos, would also oversee the provision of scriptural guidance in an orderly manner. Or again,

122 TK, 2: 249.
123 TK, 1: 22, 31.
124 TK, 2: 248.
125 TK, 1: 30.

if prophets are of the highest intellect, it stands to reason that the book associated with the one's person would reflect this exceedingly high stature and accomplish the purpose intended by the divine source. In this way, it can be seen how it would be consistent with Sayyid Ahmad's thought to assume an intentionality within the structure of scripture, a coherence and order in its arrangement, and that this arrangement could provide vital information for accurate interpretation. The Qur'an is a fine weaving of signs revealed on multiple occasions over an extensive period. No explanation for the complex pattern was provided within the text itself, or in the canon of Hadith, and the movements in it can be difficult to understand. In fact, in Sayyid Ahmad's estimation, it is the paucity of contextualizing narrative information (*riwāyat*) in the Qur'an that creates the need to rely on Hadith, *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* to elucidate meaning.[126]

The absence of this information within the Qur'an has caused interpreters to search for answers beyond the text. One example from Sayyid Ahmad's commentary on Q 5:30 is instructive. The passage concerned the sacrifice offered to God by Abel, the son of Adam. Jewish and Christian thinkers, Sayyid Ahmad writes, understood that fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering according to the pattern seen with Abraham (Genesis 15:17), Moses, Gideon, Elijah (1 Kings 18:30–31), David (1 Chronicles 21:26), and Solomon (2 Chronicles 7:1).[127] As these sacrifices were burnt by fire from heaven, they found it reasonable to assume the same occurred with Abel, despite the text's silence on this matter. But our Muslim exegetes, he reflects, apparently imitated (*muqallid*) these without even examining the Genesis account. Jewish commentators add a note of caution: Abel's sacrifice was 'possibly' a burnt offering; but Muslim scholars claim that fire 'clearly' came down from heaven. The absence of detail in the Qur'an about this event led to unnecessary dependence on the works of Jewish and Christian exegetes and these assumptions became crystalized in tradition. This is similarly noted in the examples from Sayyid Ahmad's *Tafsīr* considered in the previous chapter regarding Jesus's virgin birth and speech as an infant, and even the crucifixion. The reliance upon sources external to the Qur'an has influenced mainstream theology. The point made in the example is that the inclusion of narrative material in the Bible was a boon that facilitated interpretation from information found within the body of the text, and this decreased reliance upon external evidence. His example also illustrates his view of the interrelated history of scriptural interpretation in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpretative traditions, and implies a

126 TQ, 1: 124–128.

127 Biblical references provided by Sayyid Ahmad within the text.

history of dependence upon the narrative material included within the 'before books' to decipher the message of the Qur'an.

13 Revelation in the Bible

Previous studies have recognized Sayyid Ahmad's acceptance of the Hebrew Bible, but have struggled to define precisely his position on the Christian New Testament. This is largely due to Dar's assumption, already mentioned in the section above. Sayyid Ahmad, however explicitly states in Part 1, Discourse 3, that 'the terms *Tawrāt*, *ṣuḥuf al-anbiyā'*, *Zabūr* and *Injīl* in the Qur'an (3:93; 5:46–51; 2:113) refer to those writings currently available by the same name and included in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible'.[128] In other words, he accepts the present Christian Bible – 'Old and New Testaments' – as the very writings commended by the Qur'an. This is rather unique, and it requires careful consideration.

Revelation occurs in manifold ways – whether in the way bees manage the hive, in the dreams and visions of certain men and women, or even in sermons and conversations. The mothers of Moses (Q 20:7) and Jesus (Q 19:16–22; 42–45), for example, received revelation (*waḥy*), as did Cyrus (Q 18:87), and the Caliph 'Umar, according to the *Mishkāt*.[129] But they were not recognized as having legislative authority in their own right. They operated under the dispensational umbrella of a *rasūl* (messenger; pl. *rusul*). The question was not one of authenticity, but rather of authority. The veracity and worth of the revelation are affirmed, but it is limited in scope. This is contrasted with what the Qur'an refers to as a book (*kitāb* and *ṣuḥuf*): the scriptures, the revelation recorded and passed down by believing communities.

Writings ascribed to a *rasūl* have religio-ethical authority. 'Umar, as noted above, received revelation, and many regarded his words and actions as Sunna, but he was clearly understood to be operating under the dispensation of Muḥammad, the final prophet. Revelation granted to Moses and Jesus, however, was of a higher order than that of 'Umar because they are among the *rusul*. In their contexts and for their respective communities, each was fully authorized to establish doctrinal ordinances (*ḥukm-i shar'ī*). They were legislative prophets. From among the prophet's community, there can be other subsequent revelation recipients, but they operate within the covenant (*'ahd*)

128 TK, 1: 22–23. For an almost identical statement see al-Biqā'ī, *Naẓm al-durar*, 4: 380.

129 TK, 1: 9–11.

of the *rasūl*. As we shall see, this distinction is essential for explicating Sayyid Ahmad's view of the New Testament.

14 The New Testament Authors

Sayyid Ahmad explicitly states that 'all books before Christ can be comprehended under the name of *Tawrāt*'.[130] As already noted in Chapter 3, he affirms the view that they were re-established by Ezra and affirmed by Jesus in his day. He does not provide a similarly conclusive statement for the New Testament, and this has generated considerable speculation. If *Tabyīn* were perceived as a work of rapprochement, or even of polemic as Dar claimed, the absence of a definitive statement might appear to be obfuscation. Sayyid Ahmad lived under British rule – in a period of violent retribution – and in a period of intense Christian proselytism. But once *Tabyīn* is read in the order in which it was composed, beginning with Part 3, Sayyid Ahmad's view comes into sharp focus. Far from obscuring his view, Sayyid Ahmad goes to great lengths to express his position on the New Testament in a clear and straightforward manner.

To accurately ascertain his view, we again return to Dar's analysis. Sayyid Ahmad regarded the New Testament writings, Dar explains, as vestiges of truth compiled from the recollections of Jesus's companions, the Apostles. Dar bases this conclusion primarily on statements found in Discourse 5, where Sayyid Ahmad states that the 'New Testament contains books written by Christ's Apostles and includes what descended from God'.[131] This statement, however, must be placed in context and understood within the framework of the distinction made between *matn* and *riwāyat*. Sayyid Ahmad does not accept the former and disqualify the latter, but rather regards them as component parts of a coherent record of scriptural revelation. As we recall, this was precisely why he opposed Bishop Colenso, who sought to disentangle the authentic portions from 'imaginative fables'. Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'If that were accepted as right, we should then not find a single word worthy of credit, in which we could fearlessly place our faith, in the conviction that it has its origin a divine source'.[132] The text received is the text to be read.

Furthermore, Sayyid Ahmad resolutely defends the character of the Biblical authors, whom he calls 'sacred historians'. This is made particularly clear with

130 Ibid., 2: 8.
131 Ibid., 1: 39.
132 Ibid., 3: 249.

regard to the authors of the New Testament.[133] In his estimation, they are not mere scribes, compilers or editors. Rather, they were recipients of divine revelation and inspiration (*ṣāḥib-i waḥy*, *ṣāḥib-i ilhām*). Their writings are worthy of obedience (*wājib al-ʿamal*). 'The *anājīl* (pl. of *Injīl*) and writings of the *tābiʿīn*', Sayyid Ahmad writes, 'are based on the testimony of the Apostles (*ḥawāriyūn*) and are all subsumed in the Qurʾanic term *injīl*'.[134] When the Qurʾan applies the term '*injīl*', it is precisely in reference to the four gospels (*anājīl*) in the Christian New Testament. It is known that the authors were disciples of the apostles (*tābiʿīn*), and they wrote under the guidance and authority of the apostles. Once the confusion regarding *matn* and *riwāyat* is removed, however, and once statements from Parts 2 and 3 are taken into account, it becomes clear that Sayyid Ahmad attributes to the Gospels the same degree (*darja*) of esteem as he does to the Hebrew Bible. While this renders our author's view of the Gospels quite clear, ascertaining his position on the remaining books of the New Testament presents a further challenge.

One of Sayyid Ahmad's statements seems to divorce the Gospels from the other New Testament writings. Upon careful consideration, however, this proves not to be the case. Our author writes, 'Epistles and extraneous accounts are included as part of the divine text by Christians, but Muslims exclude these and understand only that spoken by Christ as word of God (*kalām ilāhī*)'.[135] The key to ascertaining his position is found in the distinction made between revelation (*waḥy*) and divine word (*kalām ilāhī*). Sayyid Ahmad is not saying that only the words of Christ are *waḥy*. That would contradict the numerous occasions on which he explains that this is not the case. The distinction he makes has to do with the legislative authority of Christ's words as compared

133 To my knowledge, Sayyid Ahmad did not compare the process of the composition Bible with that of the Qurʾan. However, it can be inferred that he applied this degree of divine sovereignty to the collection and transcription of the Qurʾan. If the work of the 'sacred historians' who wove together the different sources of the Hebrew Text – which he does reference – could be affirmed as sacred scripture, the same could be extended to the interlacing of the Meccan and Medinan verses within suras, and of suras in their final order within the Qurʾan.

134 TK, 1: 31. As Sayyid Ahmad explains in the same section of *Tabyīn* Part 1, the term '*injīl*' is more than the name of a 'book'. It is an Arabic transliteration (*muʿarrab*) of 'evangel', which is rendered in English as 'Gospel', and means an announcement of good news, such as the birth of a Roman ruler; or in this case, the announcement of God's provision of salvation to mankind. For a detailed account on the development and usage of the term, see Klyne Snodgrass, 'The Gospel of Jesus', in Marcus Bockmuehl and Donald A. Hagner (eds), *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31–44. For a recent Muslim exploration, see Shabbir Akhtar, *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes:Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (London: Routledge, 2018), 45–70.

135 TK, 1: 31.

with other revelation, such as that granted to Jesus's mother or to ʿUmar, as noted above. The words of Jesus recorded in the present Gospels are *kalām ilāhī*, and thus are effective for instituting doctrinal ordinances. Jesus was a legislative prophet and his followers received revelation (*taḥdīs*) under this dispensation. They were recipients of revelation, and their words were inspired, revealed and worthy of obedience according to the covenant ratified by Jesus. The 'sacred historians' tasked to compile, arrange and transcribe the writings of the New Testament functioned as 'heirs' of Jesus, and thus were vouchsafed by divine provision.

As Yohanan Friedmann has convincingly argued, this paradigm for the extension of prophetic authority is of longstanding significance in this context. Friedmann examined its application among the followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement. Mirza and his followers applied this same rationale to validate the reception of 'continuous prophecy' without disputing the status of Muḥammad as the final prophet. As there is no end to God, they argued, there will be no end to revelation (*waḥy*). But there will be no further legislative prophets, who operate under the law-giving dispensation of Muḥammad.[136] This concept of revealed guidance undergirded the preaching of many spiritual leaders in this context. It was a means to express their own particular authority and therefore the superiority of their *masklak* above others.[137] As noted in Chapter 2, the ideas of Ibn ʿArabī were held in very high regard in this context, and here again we see the depth of his influence as 'the greatest master' (*al-shaykh al-akbar*). Although he was not the first to distinguish between 'lawgiving prophecy' and 'universal prophecy', Ibn ʿArabī clarified that one who functions as 'heir' to a prophet is himself a recipient of revelation. As he stated in *Kitāb al-Tajalliyyāt* (Book of Theophanies), the divine effulgence is such that 'even the ordering of the subject matter does not proceed from his own will'.[138] 'I have not written one single letter of this book save by divine dictation (*imlāʾ ilāhī*) and dominical vouchsafing (*ilqāʾ rabbānī*)'.

Sayyid Ahmad applies this Akbarian distinction to the canonical writings of the Christian New Testament. The words of Jesus were *kalām ilāhī*, for he was a

136 Friedmann, *Prophecy*, 63.

137 S.A. Zaidi, 'Who is a Muslim? Identities of exclusion – north Indian Muslims, c. 1860–1900', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 2 (2010): 205–229; Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 185–187.

138 Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 18.

prophet granted legislative authority. The 'heirs' received inspiration and revelation, and proceeded under the covenantal dispensation of Jesus. As clarified in *Tabyīn* Part 1 (Discourse 2), even the honeybee receives *waḥy*, but only the *rasūl* receives *kalām ilāhī*. Holy ordinances (*ḥukm-i sharʿī*) are established only by *kalām ilāhī*. Jesus's apostles were recipients of revelation (*ṣāḥib-i waḥy*), but not recipients of *kalām ilāhī*.[139] They did not speak and act on their own authority, but rather on the authority of Jesus. For this reason, Sayyid Ahmad observes, Muslim and Christian scholars are in agreement on this matter, for they agree that the apostles did not have the authority to prescribe ordinances (*sharīʿat*) independent of those instituted by Jesus. The statements of Christ are given precedence over those of any apostle (*ḥawārīn*) because of his inherent authority as a messenger (*rasūl*).[140]

Sayyid Ahmad observes that Muslims and Christians applied their own respective means to assign interpretative priority. Drawing an example from *ʿilm al-ḥadīth*, he explains that the testimony of one who spent the most time with the Prophet, and was best informed on a matter, was given greater weight. Though no particular names are provided in this portion of Sayyid Ahmad's text, one could infer from the preceding paragraphs that Ibn Masʿūd, for example, was with the Prophet even while Zayd was still a child, and thus his testimony deserved a higher priority, similar in status to that of Ibn ʿAbbas. He observes that a similar principle was also applied by Christians to establish the contents of the Biblical canon.

It is vital to note that the issue addressed by Sayyid Ahmad in this instance is not whether the Epistles, or all writings other than the Gospels, should be omitted from the New Testament canon. Rather, when the discourse is read with care, the meaning becomes clear: greater interpretative weight should be given to the statements of Christ that are *kalām ilāhī* than to the traditions of his followers and the 'sacred historians' who act and speak through his spirit, and in his authority, and as his 'heirs'.

15 Writings Other Than Gospels in the New Testament

The conclusion to Discourse 5, in *Tabyīn* Part 1, holds the key to Sayyid Ahmad's view on the non-Gospel writings in the New Testament. Here, he presents the

139 TK, 1: 33.
140 Ibid., 31.

most direct application of the *ayāh* affixed as a signpost embellishing the book's cover: 'We make no distinction between any of them'. Though separated by time and space, whether 'Matthew, Paul, or Muḥammad', they are unified by vocation.[141] Assuredly Sayyid Ahmad would in no circumstances denigrate his beloved Prophet, so it is obvious that he is aiming to emphasize his point, namely: 'The revelation of the former prophets (*sābiqīn*) is no less than that which was granted to the Prophet Muḥammad'.[142] The most cogent explanation is that he is seeking to underscore both the continuity of mission shared by prophetic messengers and compatibility of their messages.

Sayyid Ahmad astounds the reader by listing Matthew and Paul in the company Muḥammad. In doing so, he establishes an unlikely association between these revered personalities. One would expect to find Muḥammad listed in the company of Moses and Jesus, not alongside Matthew and Paul, and this is precisely Sayyid Ahmad's point. Matthew and Paul were recipients of revelation and of inspiration (*ṣāḥib-i waḥy*, *ṣāḥib-i ilhām*). As al-Rāzī stated, 'God answered the prayers of the disciples and made them prophets and messengers, for they revived the dead and did all the things which Jesus was able to do'.[143] They were not legislative prophets like Moses, Jesus or Muḥammad, but their words and deeds were operative because of covenantal authority. Sayyid Ahmad affirms the efficacious nature of the New Testament writings as accepted by the Christian community, including the epistles of Paul, according to the same reasoning by which the authentic Hadiths were understood to provide a scriptural basis for Sunna. Though different in form from the Qurʾan, they were to be regarded by Muslims with the same degree of reverent esteem as that given to the sublime words articulated by the Prophet of Islam.

This interpretation of Discourse 5, in *Tabyīn* Part 1, is consistent with the first pages of Part 3, where Sayyid Ahmad first introduces the project. He writes, 'The guidance and light brought by that prophet [i.e. Muḥammad] will be attributed in this commentary to the divine word that comprises the Old

141 Ibid., 24.

142 Ibid.

143 Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qurʾān and Its Interpreters*, vol. 2: *The House of ʿImran* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 163. See for example ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-masīr fī ʿilm al-tafsīr* (Beirut: Al-Kitāb al-Islamī, 2002), 1169; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūtī, *Al-durr al-manthūr fī tafsīr bil maʾthūr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1993), 597. These draw from the earlier statements of Ibn ʿAbbās and Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, and include a wide range of commentators ranging from Ibn al-Jawzī, Suyūtī, Rāzī, and more contemporary conservatives such as Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1839).

Testament and New Testament'.[144] *Tabyīn* was not intended to be a study of parts of the Old and New Testament, but of its contents in their entirety. Sayyid Ahmad understood that Biblical literature is a twilled blend of *waḥy matlū* and *ghayr matlū*, *matn* and *riwāyat*, which cannot be pulled apart if its value is to be preserved. The form and style differ from that of the Qurʾan, but this must not diminish its value.

Although one remains sceptical about the degree to which the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* taxonomy was intelligible to the general public, Sayyid Ahmad succeeded in drawing readers deeper into the complexity of inter-textual study. In fact, he managed to draw his multi-faith audience into an equally uncomfortable paradigm whereby each was challenged to approach the other's scripture with a high degree of reverence.

The discourse progression in *Tabyīn* Part 1 indicates that Sayyid Ahmad was seeking to downplay theological differences through a process of interpretative analysis. His use of a taxonomy from *ʿilm-i ḥadīth*, however, was a double-edged sword. This was a 'Mahometan Commentary' and so it was appropriate and beneficial to frame the discussion in language from within the Islamic discursive tradition. But it also carried the risk of being misunderstood. He applies terms to present a universally descriptive means by which revelation found in the Bible, Qurʾan, and Sunna could be read intertextually. Though different in form, they share a similar nature as revelation.[145]

16 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the main structure and substance of Sayyid Ahmad's thinking about the Bible in the light of the Qurʾan. His approach to scripture was shaped within a philosophy of knowledge developed through both experience and experiment. For Sayyid Ahmad, all scripture proceeds through similar human and historical mechanisms. This assumption creates a level ground on which to consider the content and purpose of these messages. Differences of form are rationalized through categories familiar to a particular class of Muslim religious scholar. Though the taxonomy is well established, its application to the Jewish and Christian scriptures is original.

Some of Sayyid Ahmad's writings made an immediate impact upon the Indian Muslim community. The *Tabyīn* did not. If sales are taken as an indicator,

144 TK, 3: 15.
145 Ibid., 1: 30.

as they were by Sayyid Ahmad, there was not enough interest to sustain the venture. Sales were low, only approximately 250 copies had been purchased by the end of 1865.[146] In retrospect, it may be that the person most transformed by the experience was the author himself.

146 Guenther, 'Christian Responses' 75.

CHAPTER 5

The Coherence of Revelation

1 Introduction

As we have seen thus far, Sayyid Ahmad subcribed to an anomalously positive view of the Bible. Upon careful consideration, it can be seen that he was attempting to flatten the surface of the texts so that the Bible and Qur'an could be read as on a level plain, or as he said 'without distinction'. This was not limited to Sayyid Ahmad's early writings, such as those found in *Tabyīn*. Indeed, sample passages from *Tafsīr*, in which his hermeneutical approach was already fully developed, demonstrate the sustained maintenance of this approach in his overt use of Biblical passages to inform Qur'anic exegesis. In the previous chapter, it was noted that Sayyid Ahmad's understanding of prophetic scripture proceeded within a particular view of the coherence of all divine revelation. He understood that prophetic guidance – in its many recorded forms, and most perfectly in the Qur'an – was generated in conformity to the processes of natural revelation. Prophetic revelation proceeded through the natural processes of the created order. Universal elements of divine origin have been distilled and articulated through human faculties by 'prophets' across diverse cultural and historical contexts. And as we shall see, Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation reinforced his sense of agency and his ability to engage critically with these scriptures and with his own exegetical tradition.

In this chapter, we explore Sayyid Ahmad's theological trajectory within the wider context of nineteenth-century Indian Muslim thought. There was a continuity between Sayyid Ahmad and the scholarly tradition of Delhi's Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, the school of Shāh Walī Allāh and the heirs of the eponymous Mujaddidī order of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī. The school's pedagogy was characterized by a signature combination of scripturalist rationalism, which is clearly discernible in Sayyid Ahmad's writings.[1] This legacy helps to explain why he composed a commentary rather than, for example, a comparative study of ethical statements or a biographical account such as a 'Life of Jesus' similar to Muir's 'Life of Mahomet'. The scriptural tradition predisposed Sayyid Ahmad to the direct exegetical study and translation seen in *Tabyīn* and *Tafsīr*, and the rationalist tendency provides a robust framework to support his interpretative approach. Rational constraints shaped his ontology and qualified the way in

1 Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 170–171.

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which he perceived phenomena. The combination of these elements brings his approach to prophetic revelation into sharper relief, even while drawing attention to the originality of his thought.

There is a continuity shared between Sayyid Ahmad and Delhi's Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, the House of Shāh Walī Allāh, which embodied the blend of juristic and spiritualist ideals typical of this era in the Persianate world. As Jamal Malik has convincingly argued, their characteristic 'philosophical scripturalism' brought a new dynamism to religious sciences. This cluster of thinkers, many of whom were established in the Naqshbandī-Mujaddidī Sufi order, although centred in Delhi, were part of a diffuse network that extended from India to Iran, Syria and Andalusia, and over the seas to the Hijaz and the Malay Archipelago. While European schools during this period were excelling in the mechanical sciences, the Persianate region was reaching a zenith of its own in philosophy, or in what was known in English at that time as the 'natural sciences'. The writings of great philosophers, such as al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī, Ibn ʿArabī, al-Simnanī, and Mulla Ṣadrā, were actively read, discussed, and challenged by thinkers across this diffuse network. These were Sayyid Ahmad's intellectual predecessors, and they shared a highly developed understanding of the connection between history and revelation. They had opened a channel through which Sayyid Ahmad could proceed.

Awareness of this continuity is of great importance for locating Sayyid Ahmad within the manifold voices of Muslim religious discourse. There is a widely held view that his intellectual trajectory is overly dependent upon the ideas of European post-Enlightenment thinkers.[2] Many accusations were made during his lifetime, and they persist in the literature today, namely that his theology simply was not 'Muslim' enough. Sayyid Ahmad was cognizant of this rhetoric and conscious of the need to demonstrate the linkages within his own tradition. Tracing these connections to the past clarifies both the continuity and originality of his thinking.

Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings touched a sensitive nerve. It is difficult to isolate, however, what in particular caused such extensive disaffection as has been expressed by so many of his coreligionists. Many accusations were levelled against Sayyid Ahmad by important scholars among his contemporaries, such as Imdād ʿAlī Akbarābādī, ʿAlī Baksh Khan and Muḥammad Qāṣim Nanotavī.[3] He was accused of heresy and reviled as an unbeliever (*kāfir*). Even

2 Khan, *Principles of Exegesis*, 334; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 30; Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 148.

3 Troll, 'Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and His Theological Critics', 261–272. See also Imdād ʿAlī Akbarabadī, *Imdād al itesab ala madahen fī aḥkām ṭaʿām ahl-i kitāb* (Kanpur: Nawal Kishore, 1868). This is a refutation of Sayyid Ahmad's *Aḥkām-i taʿām*. For a cogent summary of the disourse of exclusion, see Zaidi, 'Who Is a Muslim?'

within these written exchanges, however, opponents seem hesitant to specify the most profound point of contention, namely Sayyid Ahmad's position on the nature of the Qur'an.

2 Continuity and Originality

Sayyid Ahmad's assessment of the contingency of prophetic scripture, as described in the previous chapter, placed him in serious discordance with many of his coreligionists. The reason he was so often 'demonized' was chiefly on account of his view of prophetic revelation in the Qur'an. By establishing the hermeneutical priority of the 'law of nature', which he used interchangeably with the idea of 'cause and effect', he caused many who supported his liberalizing reforms to turn back. This led to a logical conclusion that many were not prepared to accept.

There are many possible causes for the high level of opposition to Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings. Muda Ismail, for example, posited that it stemmed from a misunderstanding of his interpretative methodology. It is vital to recall that the methods of scriptural interpretation were not set in stone but were a subject of active review in this context. Delhi reformists, for example, questioned even some of the most established hermeneutical principles such as communal consensus (*ijmāʿ*), which was traditionally recognized as an important source of authority. Both large and small groups of people, as Shāh Walī Allāh quipped, can be equally in error.[4] Sayyid Ahmad's use of innovative reasoning (*ijtihād*) to reformulate guidelines for religious practice threatened many dearly held beliefs. But the legitimacy of his interpretative conclusions, as Ismail recorded, were shared by many scholarly thinkers and, like many in his milieu, he applied this hermeneutical device consistently and responsibly. In the main, Ismail concluded that Sayyid Ahmad's methodology was sound and consistent with that used by reputable scholars, so his methodology alone does not suffice as an explanation for the degree of opposition brought to bear against him.

Taking a different tack, some have argued that the friction was caused by Sayyid Ahmad's assessment of Hadith as a source of interpretation. In this estimation, the level of the scepticism he expressed towards the historicity – and, therefore, the authenticity – of the reports placed Sayyid Ahmad in the category of 'rejecter of Hadith' (*munkar-i Ḥadīth*), rather than in that of a critical traditionalist.[5] His statements led some to assume that he removed Hadith

4 Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 168–169.

5 Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority of the Past*, 54.

altogether from the canon of Islam (to use Musa's term), a position that would later become the mainstay of the *Ahl al-Qur'ān* movement[6] and this has led to a reading of Sayyid Ahmad through the writings of Abdullah Chakrālavī and Ghulam Ahmad Pervez, who are often regarded as his intellectual heirs. This, however, is not altogether correct. As Bashir Ahmad Dar has observed, Sayyid Ahmad preferred to maintain a studied silence rather than assume a definitive position on the historical value of Hadith and at no point did he fully sever his ties with the study of Hadith or interpret the Qur'an 'free from Sunna'.[7] The fact of the matter is that he was deeply concerned by over-reliance on Hadith to explain the occasions of Qur'anic revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), which filtered the perfectly arranged message of the Qur'an through a corpus of sayings of dubious historicity. He could not determine whether these were really the words of the Prophet, and this was an honest concern. It was also a concern informed by the extensive progress in Hadith criticism that was taking place in this milieu. Shāh Walī Allāh himself culled the Hadith collections and called for a severe evaluation of not only the methods, but also the sources for Qur'anic interpretation, and these deliberations continue today.[8] The accusation that Sayyid Ahmad was *munkar-i Ḥadīth* does not account for the degree of antipathy expressed towards him.

Other authors, such as Baljon and Rahbar, have reasoned that it was Sayyid Ahmad's extreme naturalism that caused such severe opposition. He rejected outright the possibility of supernatural activity, and this challenged many cherished beliefs. If the 'law of nature' (*qānūn-i qudrat*) cannot be suspended, divine activity is severely constrained. Even if this were according to design, it still impinged on the very notion of divine sovereignty. As can be seen from *Tabyīn* Part 2 onwards, Sayyid Ahmad held that revelation must conform to reason as readily observable in nature. Thus, any verse that contravened the 'law of nature' required a figurative interpretation, which radically contradicted the traditional interpretative approach. This concern, though clearly important, does not sufficiently identify the issue. There are examples of those who questioned divine causality and evaluated the possibility and purpose of

6 Ibid.

7 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 11.

8 Amīn Iḥsān Iṣlāḥī, *Fundamentals of Hadith Interpretation* (*Mabādi' tadabbur-e ḥadīth*), trans. Tariq Mahmood Hashmi (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2013), 1–15; Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *The Sunna of the Prophet: The People of Fiqh Versus the People of Hadith*, trans. Aisha Bewley and Abdalhaqq Bewley (London: Dar al-Taqwa, 2009), 9–30.

miracles[9] and it is not difficult to identify multiple proponents of views similar to this one. For example, Shaykh Mustafā al-Marāghī (d. 1929), Rector of al-Azhar, articulated a very similar position:

> True religion cannot possibly be in conflict with true science; and when we are positive of the truth of some scientific proposition, which seems to be in conflict with Islam, it is because we do not properly understand the Qur'ān and tradition. We have a universal doctrine of our religion that when an apodictic proof is in conflict with a revealed text we must interpret the text allegorically. Besides the Qur'ān was revealed in the Arabic tongue, which as you know is quite elastic.[10]

Degrees of rationalism and naturalism predated Sir Sayyid and have survived within mainstream modern Muslim thought. The issue was not with naturalism per se, but particularly with the extension of naturalist constraints upon prophetic revelation. Each of the issues set out above was to some degree controversial, but they do not spell out the core issue, which is none other than Sayyid Ahmad's position on the contingency of prophetic revelation in the Qur'an.

There was fundamental opposition to Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation. By far the most clear and systematic set of allegations during his lifetime were those brought forward by ʿAli Baksh Khan,[11] who worked closely with Sayyid Ahmad to form the Scientific Society in Ghazipur in the early 1860s during the period when the *Tabyīn* was published. They laboured together to make European scientific texts available in Indian vernacular translation but the bitter criticisms written a decade later indicate a rupture between these colleagues. ʿAlī Baksh systematically presented this list of concerns as a means to expose what he perceived as a dangerous drift in the ideas of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and they indicate the most central issue.

The first seven allegations address Sayyid Ahmad's conception of natural revelation and the resulting view of the relation of the Creator to creation. These were followed by five more on the subject of prophetic revelation. The list continued, but the rest of the allegations were basically consequential to

9 Vitali V. Naumkin, 'Some Problems Related to the Study of Works by al-Ghazâlî', in *Ghazali: La raison et le miracle*, ed. A.M. Turki (Paris: Editions Maisoneuve et Larose, 1987), 199–124.

10 Quoted in Habib I. Katibah, *New Spirit in Arab Lands* (New York: Private press, 1940), 27–28.

11 Troll, '*Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and His Theological Critics*', 263–267.

the central issue of revelation. Clearly these two men, who were once close friends, had reached an impasse that propelled them along opposing paths. Though the recorded exchanges addressed many specific issues, the core subject was the matter of revelation and its implicit theological repercussions.

The root cause of opposition to Sayyid Ahmad was not his definition of the supernatural per se, but rather to the implications of this premise for one particular supernatural event: the advent of the Qur'an. The fundamental problem with insisting that the miraculous must conform to the laws of nature was that it impinged on the power of God to communicate the revealed word in the manner affirmed by tradition. If all supernatural activity must be qualified, the miracle of the Qur'an must also be interpreted in conformity with these laws. The subject that Sayyid Ahmad 'touched', which was out of bounds in his day and remains taboo even among some critical Muslim scholars today, was the descent of the Qur'an, that is, the way in which the message was received by the Prophet.[12] This was the elephant in the room. One result of this tension is the unfortunate dichotomy created between so-called 'believing' and 'critical' Muslims,[13] the former being those who believe that the Qur'an is the verbatim 'word of God', and latter being those who hold that Muḥammad had a more complex role in its formulation.

The nature of the Qur'an is a sensitive topic but, in *Tafsīr*, Sayyid Ahmad does not mince his words. As correspondence with Mohsin ul-Mulk reveals, controversy surrounded the exegetical project from the outset, and the instalments released to the public met with increasingly heated criticism. The fact that such a prominent intellectual was addressing such a sensitive issue in public was a cause of great concern among community leaders. It is understandable that it would be easier for some to dismiss Sayyid Ahmad's ideas as the progeny of European theism, rather than to take his position seriously.[14] However, a close reading of his works, particularly *Tafsīr*, reveals that he was mindful of such accusations and that he took additional steps to identify the connection of his ideas with those of eminent Muslim scholars. Confident in his cause and determined to secure a hearing, he took particular care to demonstrate his continuity within Muslim theology.

The effort to demonstrate continuity can be seen in the opening pages of *Tafsīr*. In these first lines, Sayyid Ahmad states an unequivocal acceptance of the Qur'an as verbatim revelation (*waḥy matlū*), the very 'word of God' (*kalām ilāhī*). He then proceeds immediately – within the same sentence – to chastise

12 Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 266–269.

13 Gätje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis*, 1–3.

14 Khan, *Principles of Exegesis*, 335.

Shāh Walī Allāh for believing differently. Indeed, the place and manner in which Sayyid Ahmad introduces this delicate topic indicate that he was determined to make a pre-emptive start. His disclosure, namely that this 'father of Indian orthodoxy' (to use Fazlur Rahman's term) accepted the active participation of Muḥammad in formulating the words and order of the Qurʾan, shifted attention away from his own innovative explanation, and toward the great breadth of diversity among religious scholars even on this most sensitive of subjects. He volunteers no further information in this opening salvo beyond his personal affirmation of this creedal conviction. There is no statement on method, no mention of Hadith, and no juxtaposition between the Qurʾan and other revealed sources, such as the Sunna or Bible. The elucidation of these issues will appear later in subsequent pages as the exposition proceeds, and only the composite picture can reveal the complexity of Sayyid Ahmad's view.

As will be discussed below, there is a rationale by which Sayyid Ahmad argues that the Qurʾan emerged from within the generated world, like all other prophetic scripture, and that it is not a facsimile from another realm. This contradicts what is regarded as the 'orthodox' doctrine of the Qurʾan, which had crystalized between the ninth and eleventh centuries. This was the notion, as William Graham cogently summarized, 'of a wholly externalized verbatim transmission of the Qurʾanic revelations by the Prophet that excluded any active role for him in shaping their specific words'.[15] The Qurʾan was an intrusion into the cosmos. God intervened in the created order to supernaturally reveal these signs to Muḥammad. Sayyid Ahmad's explanation, along with his claim that this view was shared by revered scholars, was a direct affront to the traditional Sunni consensus, and it was certainly poignant enough to stimulate the degree of recorded opposition. The continuity on this subject shared by Sayyid Ahmad with other Raḥīmiyya scholars, however, has not been adequately addressed in earlier studies and it remains a gap in the research. This is a matter of central concern, for it raises serious questions concerning both the parameters and the determinants of 'orthodoxy' in this context. Let us now consider Sayyid Ahmad's claim of continuity, and consider how this may help to explain the complexity of his stance on prophetic revelation.

3 Scripturalist *falsafa*

Sayyid Ahmad addresses the delicate topic of revelation from within the resources of his intellectual milieu. As stated throughout our study, the exegesis in *Tabyīn* and *Tafsīr* proceeds in the channel cut by others of the Mujaddidī

15 Graham, 'Revelation', 62–63.

and Raḥīmiyya. European references are taken seriously in his works, and far more are used in *Tabyīn* than in *Tafsīr*, but their benefit is more tangential than might be immediately perceived. Sayyid Ahmad consistently works within Muslim points of reference. It is vital to recall that India was a dynamic centre of religious learning. Ideas generated here were disseminated broadly throughout the Persianate world, and often translated into Arabic. The Mujaddidī approach, as taught in the curriculum of Delhi's Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, was noted for a characteristic blending of direct scriptural study and inductive philosophy (*falsafa*). Sayyid Ahmad's interpretative paradigm would have been inconceivable apart from these two influences.

Indian Muslim thought is known for a sustained interest in metaphysical philosophy. As introduced in Chapter 2, the doctrine of the 'Unity of Being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) was the lens for discerning the cosmos. Ibn ʿArabi's framework in this context had become a central tenet of Muslim belief.[16] It was the conceptual framework for a monotheistic understanding of the interrelatedness of the Creator and creation. This was a subject of supreme interest, and it generated protracted discussions among some of the greatest names in Indian Islam, two of the most prominent being those we have already introduced, Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh.[17]

The colloquy on the 'Unity of Being' developed over generations, and it was a staple of theological discourse in Sayyid Ahmad's generation. The topic featured heavily in the writings of Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and Shāh Ismāʿīl, for example, who were regarded as legitimate though contending heirs to Walī Allāh's scholarship, and as intellectual giants in their own right. Otherwise stated, the 'Unity of Being' was a recurrent topic at the heart of India's most dynamic centre of theological enquiry. The inter-generational colloquy on the relation of the Creator to creation informed the intellectual environment, and Sayyid Ahmad remained intricately involved in their deliberations on this subject. The doctrine of the 'Unity of Being' was like a membrane that enclosed the elements of the Raḥīmiyya syllabus and Sayyid Ahmad's approach to scriptural exegesis should be understood accordingly.

3.1 *Direct Scriptural Study*

Scriptural study was the hallmark of the Raḥīmiyya syllabus. This included the study of Hadith and the great works of exegesis, but the distinctive aim was

16 Tanoli, 'Forgotten Debate', 203.

17 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 263.

to train students in analysis of the Qur'an. This was a rebalancing of epistemology, a shift in the approach to knowledge. For most of the Sunni inhabitants of the Persianate world, or what Shahab Ahmad calls the 'Balkans to Bengal Complex',[18] religio-ethical authority was derived primarily by following (*taqlīd*) the four established schools of jurisprudence. Mastery of secondary sources and legal compendiums was central to religious learning and there was a renewed interest in the study of the foundational sources among these Delhi scholars, along with other reformers in the Hijaz, Iran and elsewhere.

One consequence of this shift was a stream of vernacular translations of the Qur'an. It is important to recall that translation of the Qur'ān had previously been regarded as anathema. Shāh Walī Allāh prepared a Persian rendition, which was one of the first ever attempted, a venture that led to multiple death threats.[19] The holy text was regarded as eternal, 'wholly external' to use Graham's phrase, and ultimately beyond human interpretation. Even today this distinctiveness is emphasized by labelling translations the 'meaning of the Qur'an' rather than as simply the Qur'an. This distinction is a recognition, as clearly articulated by Sayyid Ahmad in *Tabyīn* Part 1, that translation by definition entails interpretation. As George Steiner has so eloquently summarized it, 'to understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate'.[20] A text translated is a text interpreted.

The fact that the first translation movement in the history of Islam gained currency in Delhi is not happenstance; rather, it is indicative of the intellectual milieu. The pioneering Persian version was soon followed by two distinct Urdu renditions, one dynamic and the other literal in style, which were completed by two sons of Shāh Walī Allāh, ʿAbd al-Azīz and Rafīʿ al-Dīn, respectively. This was cutting-edge religious scholarship for this era and, if we are to gauge the originality of Sayyid Ahmad's thought, it is crucially important to situate him within this environment. In *Tabyīn* Part 1, Discourse 6, he proudly traces his study of the Qur'an through an uninterrupted chain of masters ending with Makṣūṣullāh, who studied under ʿAbd al-ʿAziz, who studied under Walī Allāh, and this lineage can be traced all the way to back to ʿUthman and the Prophet Muḥammad.[21] Sayyid Ahmad regarded himself as an heir to this scholarly

18 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, xi.

19 Samuel Zwemer, 'Translations of the Koran', *The Moslem World* 5, no. 3 (1915): 244–261.

20 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), xii.

21 TK, 1: 58–60.

tradition, carrying the legacy forward by presenting his own rendering of the Qur'an as reproduced in the pages of *Tabyīn* and *Tafsīr*.[22]

The register, that is the level of language usage, selected for these early vernacular translations has much to say about the school's theology. Both the Persian and Urdu renditions were deliberately composed in a style accessible to the 'common artisan'.[23] This was indicative of a democratic view that stood in stark contrast to the more elitist tendencies common in Persianate Sufism.[24] The choice of register reflected a conviction that the message of the Qur'an was intended for everyone, not just for the initiated few, and was based upon the assumption that the message was intended to be readily understood. The intention was to provide the reader with a basic and clear rendition of its meaning but this in turn served the perhaps unintended function of popularizing the translator's theological paradigm.[25]

Though the roots of this movement require further study, a symbiotic process can be seen between the direct study of the text and the drive for translation. Perhaps there was a recognition that a text's meaning is inevitably best considered in a person's preferred language.[26] Translation, whether in the mind or in speech, had been constantly occurring but on the fly, without official sanction or studied guidance. If meaning is derived from the text, parameters are required to delineate the range of suitable meanings. Close attention to providing a precise rendering requires historical and philological research, so it is not difficult to see how the development of a cycle of textual and historical research could be mutually reinforcing.

The central importance attributed to translation in this tradition provides a plausible explanation for Sayyid Ahmad's decision to not only study the Bible directly, but also to present his exploration as an exegetical commentary. This helps explain why he composed a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew and on the Book of Genesis rather than a study on the lives of Christ or Moses,

22 Husayn, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 129, 137; Muḥammad Yasīn Mazhar Ṣiddīqi, 'Shāh Walī Allāh Delhvī aur Sir Sayyid ek Taqābali Mutāliya', in *Sir Sayyid kī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān aur mābād tafsīr par uskī asrāt*, ed. Muḥammad Yasīn Mazhar Ṣiddīqi (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 2001), 115.

23 Baljon *Religion and Thought*, 149. Ṣiddīqi, 'Shāh Walī Allāh Delhvī', 116.

24 Jonathan P. Berkey, 'Tradition, Innovation, and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East', *Past & Present* 146 (1995): 38–65.

25 Stark, *Empire of Books*, 27. This became increasingly obvious with the flourishing of the indigenous publishing industry, of which Sayyid Ahmad was a pioneer. The Qur'an, along with many other books, could now be widely distributed at a price more affordable than ever before.

26 Northorp Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Mariner, 2002), 4.

or a collection of excerpts. The emphasis of the Raḥīmiyya syllabus was upon direct scriptural study so the Qur'an was read in light of scholarly resources and commentaries, but not in subservience to any of them. The text was believed to be comprehensible in its given form. Once Sayyid Ahmad is perceived to be shaped by these central aspects of Raḥīmiyya pedagogy, his predilection for direct textual study becomes understandable, even predictable. These developments in Delhi conditioned Sayyid Ahmad's approach to scripture.

In this light, the indicator of Sayyid Ahmad's originality is not his interest in the Bible per se, but rather his extension of this approach to the study of the Bible. Given the political circumstances, it is not surprising to find signs of interest in Biblical study in Delhi. Sayyid Ahmad's teacher of the Qur'an, Makṣūṣullāh, who was the grandson of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, was an avid student of the Hebrew Bible. Shāh Walī Allāh's writings affirmed the Bible as a source for Qur'anic exegesis and this further sanctioned its exploration. Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, as Sayyid Ahmad explains in *Risāla aḥkām-i ṭaʿām ahl-i kitāb* (1868), recognized British Christians and Jews to be none other than the 'People of the Book' (*ahl-i kitāb*), who were frequently affirmed in the Qur'an, and his rulings were cited to legitimize Muslim employment in the EIC and enrolment in government and missionary schools.[27] This atmosphere contributed to Sayyid Ahmad's study of the Bible and his progress in formulating the *Tabyīn* venture.

Furthermore, Raḥīmiyya scholars adopted a critical appraisal of historicity of *sīra* (biography of the Prophet) and Hadith sources. The former was weighed and rejected as an interpretative source because it was regarded as historically unsound and this judgement was carried forward in the writings of Sayyid Ahmad and of many others from his generation forward. Hadith, however, retained its value as a source of Qur'anic interpretation and moral guidance, but the Hadith collections were repeatedly sieved, a process that continues even today.[28] Many of the recorded traditions (*khabar*) were regarded with suspicion, but those deemed sound were esteemed to be determinative and by most accounts synonymous with Sunna. To put this in perspective, however, it is important to recall that, in Shāh Walī Allāh's assessment, even the collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, for example, which are regarded as the most authoritative Hadith collections, were 'but footnotes' in *al-Muwaṭṭa* of Malik ibn Anas (d. 795).[29] Without a doubt, the compilation of these massive collections was

27 Hasan, *The Aligarh Movement*, xiii.

28 For a lucid introduction, see Kamaruddin Amin, 'Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslims's Ṣaḥīḥ: A Critical Study of His Method', in *Islamic Law and Society* 11 (2004): 149–176.

29 Baljon *Religion and Thought*, 168. For an English version, see Mālik ibn Anas, *Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas: The first formulation of Islamic law*, trans. Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989).

an impressive exercise in historiography, but there were doubts as to whether it could be known for certain that they were more than a source of cultural and historical knowledge about the development of Islam as a religion.

The most dramatic points of contention in the Indian context, however, concerned the reification of Sunna in daily life.[30] The Raḥīmiyya scholars, including Sayyid Ahmad's teacher Makṣūṣullāh, were strongly represented amongst the founders of the *Ahl-i Ḥadīth* movement. Sayyid Ahmad expressed great affinity with this movement in his earlier writings from around 1842, a period he later described as his 'Wahhabi days'.[31] The group was known as 'Wahhabis' due to the perceived similarities between their thinking and the teaching of the Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, the most important being the rejection of the traditional schools of jurisprudence.[32] Some events in the Prophet Muḥammad's life were dismissed by representatives of the *Ahl-i Ḥadīth* as hagiographical and without support from authentic traditions. They included his alleged repudiation of certain devotional practices that promoted, for example, the attribution of a supernatural or excessively exalted character to 'saints, djinn, angels … and Muḥammad'.[33] In this milieu, the quest to delineate the parameters of Sunna, or to codify the application of Prophetic example, proceeded symbiotically with the critical study of the Hadith collections.[34]

In describing this scripturalist legacy, it is beneficial to observe that this trend not only preceded Sayyid Ahmad Khan, but also persisted in the generations that followed. The continuation of Delhi's scripturalist tradition can be seen in many streams. The writings of Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930), which have not been considered before in this regard, provide another perspective on this context.[35] Farāhī was a mentee of Fā'iḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpurī (already introduced in Chapter 2) in Lahore, and then worked closely – even 'daily' (*rozana*) – with Sayyid Ahmad between 1891 and 1895.[36] His extensive engagement with Sir Sayyid and other key figures of the Aligarh movement positions Farāhī as a source not previously consulted in connection with Sayyid Ahmad's later writings. Several elements presented here for the first time illustrate the

30 Sanyal, 'Are Wahhabis Kafirs?'

31 Authorial comment by Sayyid Ahmad Khan in 1883 correcting (*rajūwāt*) views expressed in *Zila al-qulūb*, 1842.

32 Qeyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement in India* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966).

33 Ingram, 'Sufis, Scholars and Scapegoats', 484.

34 Boekhoff-van der Voort, 'The Concept of Sunna', 13–38.

35 Zafar al-Islam Iṣlāhī, 'Maulana Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī', http://almawridindia.org/the-farahi-school-of-thought-personalities-and-contributions/, accessed May 10, 2021.

36 Ibid. As noted in Sayyid Ahmad's admission recommendation to the Aligarh Principal in 1891, Farāhī's Arabic and Persian were 'superior to that of the faculty'.

continuity of this scripturalist tradition and shed additional light on this progression.

Farāhī is regarded as one of South Asia's most distinguished twentieth-century Qurʾanic exegetes.[37] His most notable contribution is to the study of the Qurʾan's form and textual coherence (*naẓm*), but it is less known that he also carried forward the practice of including extensive Biblical testimony in Qurʾanic exegesis.[38] Farāhī juxtaposed, for example, the Biblical and Qurʾanic accounts of Abraham's sacrifice (*Al-rʾay al-ṣaḥīḥ fīman howa al-dhabī*), translated the Book of Proverbs from Hebrew – under the tutelage of Josef Horovitz – into Persian verse in *Khirdnāma*, and commenced a commentary on the Gospels (*Al-aklīl fī sharḥ al-injīl*).[39] The most important source, however, for ascertaining the correlation between Farāhī's approach to that of Sayyid Ahmad and the scripturalist tradition is his commentary on the Qurʾan, *Tafāsīr Farāhī*.[40] Here again we see a detailed rationale for the use of the Bible in Qurʾanic exegesis whereby the 'heavenly books facilitate the interpretation of one another'.[41] In language nearly identical to that used by Sayyid Ahmad in *Tabyīn*, Farāhī affirms that 'all this revelation [Bible and Qurʾan] has flowed from one pure spring. Naturally their parity and conformity are [the outworking of God's] power'.[42] Though further attention to Farāhī is beyond our scope here, his writings are yet another example of the continuity of this intellectual tradition. This vein of scholarship neither began nor ended with Sayyid Ahmad Khan. His was one voice among many in this larger discourse tradition. Having considered these elements in the scripturalist tradition, let us now turn to the philosophical characteristics of this pedagogy.

37 Farāhī founded the Urdu madrasa in Azamgarh, India, and the associated Iṣlāhī (reformist) scholarly movement.

38 Iṣlāhī, 'Maulana Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī', 61.

39 Some of Farāhī's works provided to me by the Faran Foundation in Lahore include *Tafāsir Farāhī*, *Al-ṭarīf fī al-taḥrī*, and *Al-rasukh fī maʿrifatu al-nāsikh wa-'l mansūkh*, and *Al-ray al-sahī fīman howa al-dhabī* (*Right guidance regarding who was sacrificed*), which appears to be a direct response to Ināyat Rasūl Chiriākotī's work on the same topic. Only fragments were located of *Al-aklīl fī sharḥ al-injīl*. Josef Horovitz was a German Orientalist who was in India for nine years, first in Aligarh then Allahabad. For an insighful introduction, see Lawrence L. Conrad, 'Editor's Introduction', in Josef Horovitz, *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and Their Authors* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 2002), ix–xxxviii.

40 Imam Hamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Majmūʿa tafāsīr-i Farāhī*, trans. Amīn Aḥsān Iṣlāhī (Lahore: Farān Foundation, 2008), 42–44.

41 Ibid., 43.

42 Ibid.

3.2 *Philosophical Foundations*

The centrality given to philosophy in Sayyid Ahmad's approach to scripture provides a second area of enquiry useful for discerning both his continuity with and originality within the intellectual tradition. India's dynamic centres of religious learning – whether in Delhi, Lucknow, Patna, Hyderabad or many other locations – sustained a flourishing exchange of ideas across the Persianate world. It was a region characterized by the pursuit of philosophical learning and a constant interest in exploring the interrelation of reason and revelation.[43] In this light, it is not surprising to find continuity between Sayyid Ahmad and the rationalism developed by other thinkers in this context, particularly among Delhi's Sufi-jurists.

It is important to recall that the Mujaddidī branch takes its name from Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī, the exalted 'reviver of the second millennium' (*mujaddid alf thānī*).[44] As Annemarie Schimmel has said, the extent of Sirhindī's influence amongst the Naqshbandī order cannot be underestimated.[45] This order was strongly represented throughout the Persianate world, and these connections allowed for Sirhindī's epistemology to be widely circulated throughout Central Asia and the Middle East. Shāh Walī Allāh, for example, shortlisted Sirhindī as one of the 'most faithful servants of God – ever'[46] and it would not be an overstatement to claim that he defined orthodoxy for a significant segment of Muslims in northern India.

Sayyid Ahmad cites Sirhindī in order to introduce his understanding of the prophetic experience of receiving revelation. He makes this reference precisely because the nature of the subject matter being addressed is particularly sensitive. It is a timely appeal to his spiritual and intellectual lineage. Sayyid Ahmad refers to Sirhindī elsewhere as 'my master' (*mere shaykh*), which signifies a very high degree of honour, one never attributed to anyone else in his extensive writings.[47] There was a special bond, and Sayyid Ahmad returned regularly to Sirhind in the Punjab throughout his life to pay homage at his

43 Tavakoli-Targhi, 'Early Persianate Modernity', 257–298.

44 Access to his letters has been hindered by the nuanced complexity of his style and meaning. Arthur Buehler's adept translations have allowed unprecedented access to the original letters and new findings continue steadily to emerge. Arthur F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindī (1564–1624)* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2012); idem, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The India Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

45 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 267–269.

46 Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 200.

47 TQ, 3: 204–208.

shrine.[48] It is also important to recall, as noted in Chapter 2, that members of Sayyid Ahmad's immediate family were intricately involved in the leadership of the Mujaddidī order (*ṭarīqa*). So Sayyid Ahmad was legitimately associated with this chain of spiritual adepts who traced their lineage back to this illustrious figure. It was a sensitive topic, and the allusion to this legacy was intended to convey a sense of authority and legitimacy.

This appeal to Sirhindī again draws attention to the philosophical foundations of Mujaddidī thought. Fazlur Rahman's study of Ibn Sīnā established a connection between Sirhindī's account of the Prophet's experience of revelation and emanationist psychology, which was precisely the point Sayyid Ahmad intended to make by his reference to Sirhindī in *Tafsīr*. Ibn Sīnā's medical examinations, as Rahman has convincingly argued, led to an original conclusion, namely that the imagination was a 'physical faculty'.[49] Trances and dreams (*waham*) were activities of the mind, rather than departures into other realms. Sirhindī's epistolary accounts of the visualization of the shaykh and other holy figures reflected Ibn Sīnā's assertion, namely that spiritual images were projections of the imagination.

> Emerging Muslim 'orthodoxy' … emphasized the *externality* of the Prophet's Revelation in order to safeguard its 'otherness', 'objectivity', and the verbal character of the Revelation … But orthodoxy lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation … the intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the Prophet.[50]

As 'orthodoxy' emerged and began to crystalize there was not the 'intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'ān is entirely the word of God and, in the ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muḥammad'.[51]

Although Rahman's work did not include Sayyid Ahmad's exegetical writings, he correlated revelation and the prophetic imagination within this very same chain of Delhi thinkers. In an extended essay titled 'Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet', Rahman details the progression of thought on this subject from Ibn Sīnā and Sirhindī, and down to Shāh Walī Allāh and Allama Iqbal (d. 1938). Whereas the emerging 'orthodoxy' may not have been prepared, he demonstrates that these representatives in subsequent generations developed the 'intellectual capacities' to conceptualize the process of revelation

48 Malik, 'Sufi Amnesia', 178.
49 Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 176.
50 Rahman, *Avicenna's Psychology*, 30.
51 Ibid., 31.

in a manner similar to that described by Sayyid Ahmad in *Tafsīr*.[52] Rahman presented extensive statements by Shāh Walī Allāh from *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn* and *Saṭaʿāt* to familiarize a broader audience with the views on this subject of persons who can only be described as central to or mainstream in the practice of Islam in South Asia. In *Fuyūḍ*, Walī Allāh wrote:

> The laws of the Sharia are always formulated in accordance with the customs of a people … Such customs as are harmful and evil, God removes them but customs and mores which are sound and good are confirmed. Similarly, the Verbal Revelation occurs in the mould of words, idioms and styles which are already existent in the mind of the Prophet.[53]

As Rahman explains, this clearly meant that the 'Revelation of the Holy Qurʾān' occurred in the very words 'already in the possession' of Muḥammad before he assumed the role of Prophet. The clearest description, which is almost identical to that of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, was presented from *Saṭaʿāt*, where Walī Allāh states:

> When God wished to communicate a guidance which is intended to abide to the end of the world, He subdued the mind of the Prophet in such a way that in the pure heart of the Prophet He sent down the Book of God in a nebulous and undifferentiated manner (*ijmalan*) … The Message comes to be imprinted in the pure heart of the Prophet as it existed in the supernal realms thus the Prophet came to know by convictions that this is the World God … Subsequently, as the need arose, well-strung speech was brought out from the rational faculties of the Prophet through the agency of the angel.[54]

Carrying forward this South Asian discourse, Rahman looks to the decades beyond Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the writings of the poet-philosopher Allama Iqbal again to demonstrate the continuity of these ideas among these stalwarts. As Iqbal explained in *Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in Islam*, the source and origin of revelation lie beyond the reach of human agency, but this is not an 'agency working on things from without'.[55] Rather, the process occurred as

52 Fazlur Rahman, 'Divine Revelations and the Holy Prophet', *Pakistan Times* (Lahore, 25 August 1968, Supplement, unpaginated).

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstrution of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 29.

an integral part of the agent's [the Prophet's] mind. Iqbal took a 'psychological' approach to explain, as Rahman put it, that the 'feeling, the idea and the word are an organic entity and are born in the mind of the Prophet at once'.[56] As can be seen, this chain of thinkers developed a means to correlate revelation and the prophetic imagination. This was made possible by the assumption of contingency: the idea that everything that exists is mutually linked and is in constant motion and development.[57]

Iqbal once described prophetic mediation (*shafāʿa*) as the seed for bearing the fruit of inductive intellect.[58] 'In its essential nature, then thought is not static; it is dynamic and unfolds its internal infinitude in time like the seed which, from the very beginning, carries within itself the organic unity of the tree as a present fact'.[59] Let me borrow this imagery to elucidate Sayyid Ahmad's view of natural revelation through an analogy. Consider a seed. Given the right growing conditions, the seed sprouts and its various internal components follow a set order of growth, producing root, stem and leaf. The intricacy of this simple seed is in a word: miraculous. It grows, produces, and the cycle is repeated infinitely according to the variables of the ecosphere. To use Sayyid Ahmad's term, God's 'work' demonstrates predictable patterns. God's 'word', insofar as it is accessible to humanity, is within this ecosphere, and must similarly conform to the variables of time and place. On occasion, it yields 'divine words' derived through dialogue with the prophetic consciousness. It also yields inspired ideas, or 'divine subjects' transposed through carefully selected words. Original (first) principles can be identified within these prophetic recordings. Such principles are universally applicable and comprise true (*thet*) religion. Created (secondary) principles can also be derived from these messages. Once deciphered, these are useful for establishing religious legislation (*sharīʿa*), which is necessary for human flourishing.[60]

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56 Rahman, *Islam*, 30–31. See also Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 95: 'Iqbal goes back behind the rationalistic commentaries and the mystical speculations to the original Quranic teachings and describes God first and last as an Ego: His name Allah, as He calls Himself in the Quran, manifests His personalistc character, and the 112th Surah, the short confession of God's unity which is of paramount inportance in Islamic thought, theology and spiritual life, is again a proof of God's being an Ego'.

57 Rahman, *Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, 12–16; idem, *Islam*, 237; Oliver Leaman, *The Qurʾān: A Philosophical Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 266; Morris, *Revelation, Intellectual Intuition and Reason*, 237.

58 Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 65–66.

59 Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religiou. s*, 6.

60 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 163.

This schema did not occur in a vacuum. Returning to the sources for Sayyid Ahmad's position, and his appeal to Sirhindī in *Tafsīr*, we note that the example provided concerns the possibility of actually seeing God on the Day of Judgement. As Sayyid Ahmad recounts, Sirhindī concluded that the meaning of Q 75:23) was that the faithful will not look upon their Lord in physical actuality, but rather they will gaze upon an imagined manifestation of the Lord.[61] Sayyid Ahmad applies this same rationale to account for the Prophet's seeing a figure or spirit on the occasions of revelation. Revelation was received through the physical faculty of imagination. The 'angel' was the vehicle of the imagination, and a reflection of consciousness. The advent of the Qur'an was miraculous, but it was not supernatural. Its reception did not necessitate a crossing over between realms because all of the relevant content and processes were already present within the prophetic habitus. The experiences of revelation were real and historical, but they occurred as projections of the Prophet's imagination.

This doctrine, however, was regarded as beyond the capacities of all but an intellectual elite. It was their view that, for most people, the 'letter of the revelation and the materialistic symbols must remain the literal truth'.[62] Sayyid Ahmad brought this rather concealed view out in public and presented it to a general audience in the vernacular. As disconcerting as this was for many of his readers, it is vital to grasp that Sayyid Ahmad's assessment was drawn from sources within this intellectual tradition whose authority was highly esteemed in this milieu. His account of the process of revelation in *Tafsīr* draws our attention to a continuity that he shared with these leading sages of Delhi's Mujaddidī, who remain stalwart elders of today's 'orthodoxy' in South Asia. Sayyid Ahmad proceeds in a channel cut by these earlier Muslim thinkers, a pathway trodden by others before him such as Sirhindī, Mullā Ṣadrā, Shāh Walī Allāh, and more recently by great thinkers such as Allama Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman.

As already noted, Ibn 'Arabī's 'Unity of Being' (*waḥdat ul-wujūd*) was a foundational framework for understanding this progression of ideas. The subject has been explored in manifold ways, and some brief clarifications are required to explain Sayyid Ahmad's particular interpretation. Controversy has surrounded Ibn ʿArabī's writings, most poignantly seen between the jurists (*fuqahā'*) and the Sufis (*ṣūfiyya*). William Chittick, who specialises in Ibn ʿArabī's metaphysics, explained that this is an issue of implicit ontology. If taken as syllogism, the Andalusian Sufi seemed to be promoting monism, or pantheism. An extensive quotation from Ibn ʿArabī's *Faṣṣ ʿĪsāwī* (presented in

61 TQ, 3: 204–208.

62 Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 42.

Tabyīn Part 3), for example, states that 'you and your Lord are one'. If taken literally, this seems to contradict the basic premise of *tawḥīd*, the foundation of Islamic monotheism. Reconciling these paradoxical doctrines kept many thinkers in Delhi, as in countless other contexts, embroiled in controversy.[63] In Sayyid Ahmad's day, this caused quite a kerfuffle even among the initiates of the Mujaddidī order.

The concept was originally intended to convey the paradoxical experience of simultaneously finding and not-finding God.[64] In this light, as Chittick wisely notes, Ibn ʿArabī was not presenting a syllogism, but rather was extending an invitation to contemplate the nature of spiritual knowledge. Chittick's translation again: 'Through reflection, man sees that reason delimits and defines everything that is known, while the Divine Essence is beyond delimitation and definition'.[65] This rendition captures Ibn ʿArabī's intent to invite the seeker to pass through the 'infinite veils' towards a profound experiential encounter with the divine. The knowledge described is subjective rather than objective; it was intended to be experienced as part of a process of spiritual development rather than captured as a premise within a systematic theology.

Interpretations of Ibn ʿArabī's ontology proceeded along a spectrum between the poles of transcendence and immanence. There were rare personalities who subscribed to one extreme or the other but, as Shahzad Bashir correctly observes, the norm was to hold to a position somewhere in between. Rather than polarized ideas, they were understood to be paradoxical truths.[66] Fifteenth-century writings by mystics such as Kashmir's patron saint Nund Rishi, for example, described the Creator in the terms of Shaivic monism as essentially indistinguishable from creation.[67] Though dismissed as blatant syncretism by many, the kernel of this idea gained traction at the time of Mughal Emperor Akbar (d. 1605) and flourished in the imperial cult of *Dīn-i ilāhi*. The opposite extreme, on the other hand, was no less demonized. In the words of Shāh Walī Allāh, the idea of a real and utter absence of the Creator from creation, a view which he described as that of the 'Aristotelian philosophers', was held only by 'the lowest of people among the living'.[68] There was a range of

63 Alexandar D. Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York 1999), 150–152.

64 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 3–4.

65 Ibid., 163.

66 Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, 23.

67 Prem Nath Bazaz, *The Sufis and Rishis of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Rumi Foundation, 2008), 16–21.

68 Baljon, *Religion and Thought*, 201.

views on this subject; between the two extremes poles, there were differences of degree that were largely seen as a matter of perspective.

There was a churning progression in Delhi's inter-generational colloquy on the *waḥdat al-wujūd* in general, and on the interrelation of the Creator and creation in particular. Understanding this progression facilitates the recognition of Sayyid Ahmad's continuity within this intellectual milieu. As introduced in Chapter 2, Shaykh Sirhindī lived during the time when Mughal rule was at its height and the Emperor Akbar was casting himself as the 'Millennial Sovereign'. As Afzar Moin has convincingly argued, Sirhindī challenged him by making his own 'grand mystical claim of power', and by successfully enlisting Akbar's heir Jahangir as his disciple.[69] There has been an erroneous tendency, however, to interpret Sirhindī as anti-Sufi based on his admonitions concerning *sharī'a*. His claim that he was inaugurating an era of history 'pivoted not on a new "doctrine" of interpretation of "law" but on taking the place – bodily and spiritually – of a sacred entity that had existed in the previous era or cycle of time'.[70] Sirhindī epitomized the 'institution of sainthood', the full extent of which could only be communicated explicitly to an inner circle of devotees and heirs.[71]

One consequence of the exclusive nature of this knowledge, as Arthur Buehler has observed, is that a misconceived opposition endures between the *wujūdī*-s and the *shuhūdī*-s. But these two formulations, as Schimmel emphasizes, were so closely linked that they were 'even used interchangeably'.[72] Some have redacted portions of Sirhindī's letters to make them seem like a rebuke of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, but this was positively not the case. Rather, Sirhindī's epistolary writings presented a complementary addition to this discourse, namely the 'Unity of Contemplative Witnessing' (*waḥdat as-shuhūd*). Sirhindī presented himself, as Afsar Moin has elegantly put it, as the incarnate divine presence, the corporeal manifestation of divine grace. This was an addition to the discourse on the 'Unity of Being', not a rejection of the doctrine. Delhi mystics did not understand Sirhindī to have overturned Ibn 'Arabī's framework, but rather to have contributed to a running ontological dialogue. As Buehler wrote, 'Sufi consensus was that there

69 Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*, 136.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid, 183. For a more recent expression of this spirituality, see Shaykh Adnan Kabbani, *Haqiqatul Haqqani: la comprensión de la realided* (Mar del Plata: Sereseres, 2010).

72 Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 267.

was really no controversy at all: both Ibn ʿArabī and Sirhindī agree that these are actually two means of perceiving the One'.[73]

Sirhindī's writings did not dismiss the 'Unity of Being' paradigm, but they addressed the need for a recalibration, a shift in degree towards the side of divine transcendence. For Sirhindī, creation was like a thought (*kheyal*) manifested by God, who is the 'true being'. The adept progressed to higher mystical stages and eventually became consumed (*fanāʾ*) in the divine, only then to return to awareness of personal individuation. The experience generated a 'contemplative witnessing' to the transcendence of the 'divine essence' (*dhāt*).[74] Like the string of a musical instrument, interpretations of the doctrine required tuning. On the continuum between immanence and transcendence, weight was shifted in Sirhindī's work towards transcendence. The divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), in this estimation, were understood to be other than the divine essence, but also identical to the essence as they operate immanently in creation.

Sirhindī's influence on the development of Shāh Walī Allāh's thought has been well documented, but it is important to note that the latter did not merely emulate the former, but rather pressed forward in his own original manner. In broad terms, Walī Allāh attempted to synthesize Sufi-philosophical cosmologies into a descriptive system. He presented an elaborate metaphysical structure that reconciled forms that appear to be in conflict, but which in actuality, once properly understood, operate in 'harmony'.[75] According to his conception, divinely emanated revelation descended into human experience through a series of intermediary worlds (*ʿālam mithāl*), or spiritual realms. As Marcia Hermansen has so aptly translated it, 'Once balance is achieved the inhered perfection of the ideal form implicit in the person, species, society … is fulfilled, and this leads to the entire form or system expanding or moving up to a new, higher, order'.[76] In a manner similar to Sirhindī, Walī Allāh was believed to have access to esoteric knowledge and power and his works, like Sirhindī's, opened a window onto this intellectual milieu and its ideas, sources and cosmology. This has allowed others to peer into this world, which otherwise would have been reserved for an initiated elite.

Some Delhi thinkers disagreed with aspects of Walī Allāh's thought. In *Tafsīr*, Sayyid Ahmad alludes to one very heated exchange among the *ʿulamāʾ-i*

73 Buehler, 'Aḥmad Sirhindī: A 21st Century Update', *Der Islam* 86 (2011): 122–141.

74 Yohanan Friedmann, 'Religious and Political Ideas of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindī', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 36 (1961): 259–70.

75 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xvi.

76 Ibid.

waḥdat al-wujūd in nineteenth-century Delhi, which is illustrative for gauging the context and situating the progress of his thinking. In Walī Allāh's conception, divinely emanated revelation descended into human experience through a series of intermediary worlds (*ʿālam mithāl*). However, Shāh Ismāʿīl (d. 1831), an adept in another branch (*silsila*) of the Sufi order, contested this emanationist cosmology alleging that it challenges the doctrine of utter divine unicity (the 'idol of Islamic theology' to use Allama Iqbal's phrase).[77] But despite their nuanced disagreements on what lies behind the veil of the physical world, Shāh Ismāʿīl interpreted accounts of apparitions and other spiritual manifestations, which appear so frequently in Sufi literature, as imagined rather than actual. If there were no intermediary beings – angels or *jinn* – that can cross between realms, these accounts must refer to imagined rather than physical phenomena. Again, we see questions forming around the nature and parameters of the immanent frame. These are markers of the channel through which Sayyid Ahmad proceeded. In this light, it can be seen how Sayyid Ahmad carried this progression forward towards a starker separation between the Creator and creation.

The importance of the 'Unity of Being' discourse in Shāh Walī Allāh's thinking is well documented, but the extent to which it predicted and even persisted in Sayyid Ahmad's mature theology has yet to be carefully examined; that would require a separate book altogether. It can be succinctly stated, however, that Sayyid Ahmad's worldview was doubtless formed with an awareness of the divinely infused universe that is assumed in this paradigm. He was raised in a family renowned for leadership among the Mujadiddīs, his ancestors were recognized as specialists in *waḥdat al-wujūd*, and he was intimately familiar with this theological discourse. As already indicated, he includes extensive quotations from Ibn ʿArabī to describe Jesus's unique status in his earliest exegetical writings in *Tabyīn* Part 3. He also appeals to Ibn ʿArabī in Parts 1 and 2, and again in *Tafsīr* in order to expound upon the meaning of *tawḥīd*.

One particular allusion in *Tafsīr* offers further insight into the nuanced nature of Sayyid Ahmad's thought: he alludes to a particularly heated exchange between two branches of the Naqshbandiyya order in his milieu, the Rasūlshāhī and the Mujaddidī. It was popularly known that on one occasion Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, son of Shāh Walī Allāh, sent one of his disciples to correct the Rasūlshāhī, but after several days he capitulated and returned with his head, beard and eyebrows shaved in the style characteristic of the

77 Muhammad Abdul Haq, *Sufism and Shariah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī's Effort to Reform Sufism* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1986), 15.

Rasūlshāhī.[78] The significance of the exchange was deeply ingrained in Sayyid Ahmad's perspective, and he apparently assumed that his readers were also privy to these nuanced differences and needed no additional details. In the commentary, Sayyid Ahmad clarifies his support for the view of Shāh Ismāʿīl and Shāh Ghulam ʿAlī (the spiritual master of Sayyid Ahmad's father, and who he himself called 'Dada') rather than that of Shāh Walī Allāh. From afar, these may seem like minor distinctions, subtle differences between persons who were revered and dear to Sayyid Ahmad, but they add precious texture to the context. One finds Bruce Lawrence's insight helpful, namely that the great scholars of religion (*ʿulamā'-i dīn*) proceeded in the line of Shāh Walī Allāh, but the great spiritual masters (*mashā'ikh-i kubrā*) followed in the line of Shāh Ghulam ʿAlī.[79] These lines converged in Sayyid Ahmad's generation, and they flow through his writings, blending a deep history of learning and spirituality, of reason and faith.

Sayyid Ahmad's view of the supernatural proceeded in a dialogical continuity with this august line of spiritual thinkers, but he also made an original contribution to this colloquy on *waḥdat al-wujūd*. Though his premise was but a further step along an existing continuum, it was still an important one. His basic argument was that, in order for the divine essence to be truly other, and for God to be singularly One, the divine attributes must have been generated at the inception of creation. Attributes are not independent, or eternal causes (*ʿillat-i azalī*), but rather they are everlasting effects (*maʿlūl-i azalī*).[80] In order for this natural conformity to have come about, the divine attributes, which remain active in creation, must have been infused at the time of creation. After this original insemination, there could be no further supernatural infusion as this would interfere with the created system. The divine essence is transcendent and timelessly beyond nature, but the generated divine attributes interpenetrate every part of the created order. This supports Ibn ʿArabi's affirmation that 'everything other than God has knowledge (*maʿrifa*) of God, [and] receives revelation (*waḥy*) from God'.[81] This view is not in conflict with

78 Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins* (Newy York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 38–40. For a description, see K.A. Nizami, *Delhi in Historical Perspective*, trans. Ather Farouqui (New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 2020).

79 Lawrence, 'Mystical and Rational Elements', 67. This article provides an exceptional description of Sayyid Ahmad's heritage and early Sufi writings, particularly *Namiqa* and in *Tazkhira*, found with *Athar al-sanadid* (1846).

80 TK, 3: 2.

81 Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 163.

the existing discourse; it is only a difference of degree along a spectrum of views on the 'Unity of Being'.

Vernacular translations provide further insight into Sayyid Ahmad's view. Consider the Arabic word *khalaqa* (and associated words from the root *k-l-q*) in the Qur'an. This is rendered in English translations as 'to create' or 'to make', (as in the Qur'anic account of creation in Q 7:54). The first Delhi translators, however, rendered this term in Urdu as *paidā*, which can mean conceive, generate, give birth to, or beget.[82] Regardless of how it is translated into English, in Urdu it is impossible to disassociate *paidā* from physical birth, in the sense of giving birth to a child. In the Urdu translations published by Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn and Shāh ʿAbdul ʿAzīz, the heavens and the earth were not made or crafted, but rather they were begotten. This is consistent with Shāh Walī Allāh's Persian translation. Both of his sons followed his usage, and Sayyid Ahmad also carried this forward into his translation and his philosophical understanding of Genesis. In this milieu, creation was expressed in the analogy of birth, which reflected and accentuated an awareness of the divine infusion in the cosmos. Again, though creation is organically interrelated, the begotten is not identical with the begetter. The generated world is saturated with divine immanence through the divine attributes, but the singularity of the divine essence remains untouched. Crops, rain and wind are all miraculous in that they are caused by God's provision and blessing. However, these are not supernaturally caused, but rather brought about through the natural order.

Sayyid Ahmad understood creation as an ordered and coherent system. The cosmos is endowed with divinely imposed limits and his interpretation of scripture conforms to this understanding. Recall the commentary on Genesis 1, for example; Sayyid Ahmad explains that creation was begotten through a singular substance (*jawhar*). The substance progressively divided into increasingly complex variants so that eventually a person became distinguishable from a tree.[83] In this light, it can be seen that the quotation from Ibn ʿArabī in *Tabyīn* Part 3, 'you and your Master are one', is not intended to be read literally or to express a monistic view. In the composite picture, creation is a unified whole, differentiated but coherent because it is of one substance that proceeded from one source.

Another means to assess Sayyid Ahmad's continuity is to observe how his ideas on the subject of revelation have been carried forward by subsequent

82 Esack, *The Qur'an*, 100–104.

83 TK, 2: 55.

writers.[84] Although space constraints preclude an exhaustive exploration, one finds it important to draw attention to the work of Fazlur Rahman on the subject of revelation, for he again speaks to the continuity of Sayyid Ahmad's ideas within this tradition.

Rahman drew from the same basic chain of discourse as Sayyid Ahmad. The Raḥīmiyya colloquy endures in Rahman's work: Ibn ʿArabī, Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh, for example, all feature heavily in his writings. Like his South Asian predecessors, his was a quest to characterize how the word of God was manifest in human experience. Despite occasional criticism of Sayyid Ahmad for being 'overly dependent upon European rationalism', Rahman expresses great admiration for him as a thinker and for his writings.[85] Sayyid Ahmad and Rahman share a similar view on revelation in the Qurʾan. For Rahman, '… Qurʾān is entirely the Word of God insofar as it is infallible and absolutely free from falsehood, but, insofar as it comes to the Prophet's heart and then his tongue, it was entirely his word'.[86] This explanation proceeds from an extensive study of Ibn Sīnā's psychology and Mullā Ṣadrā's philosophy. Ibn Sīnā identified the 'deeper personality' as the locus for the encounter of the divine emanation and the human expression.[87] Neither Sayyid Ahmad nor Rahman could digest the 'mechanical or external' description of the revelatory process, and they were in search of a more satisfactory means to elucidate how revelation proceeded from the 'heart of the Prophet'.[88]

Working from different settings but drawing from similar sources, they applied a similar paradigm to consider revelation in the Qurʾan. According to Sayyid Ahmad, the words recited as Qurʾan came about because 'the [Prophet's] conscience becomes like a mirror outside of the self, by which God's message comes forth from what is already naturally implanted within'.[89] Each sought a better way to understand how verbatim revelation – actual words – could originate from God and yet be articulated within a particular phase of history in accordance with the language and custom of the Prophet.[90] These areas of

84 Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 66–69; Troll, 'Reason and Revelation', 104–114.

85 Rahman, *Islam*, 218.

86 Ibid., 299.

87 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, ed. E. Moosa (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 100.

88 Rahman, *Islam*, 148–164, 190–204.

89 TQ, 3: 204–208. Reference is made to Shaykh Aḥmed Sirhindī, *Maktūbāt-i Imām-i Rabbānī*, vol. III ed. Nūr Aḥmad (Lahore: Nūr Company), 1964, 90.

90 Tamara Sonn, 'Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Methodology', *The Muslim World* 81, (1991) 360–363. Frederick Denny, 'Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual', *The Muslim World* 79, (1989): 91–101.

similarity require further study, but the interrelation of their views of revelation again emphasizes the continuity of Sayyid Ahmad's work within the history of Muslim thought.

Despite his obscured continuity with certain Mujaddidī thinkers, Sayyid Ahmad's outspoken rejection of the supernatural was shocking to many readers. As his biographer and friend Alṭāf Ḥālī recounts, Islam's diverse sects had finally been drawn together in one common cause to denounce Sayyid Ahmad as an unbeliever, a *kāfir* and *murtadd*.[91] Some opponents gave a pejorative twist to his term *necharī* – a witticism coined by Sayyid Ahmad himself – making it synonymous with atheist. In India, as in much of the Muslim world, there was general acceptance of the Ashʿari position, which understands the universe to be governed through direct divine intervention. Divine governance knows no bounds: every action – at least in theory – is ultimately derived from a divine initiative. Sayyid Ahmad directly and publicly contradicted this generally accepted view. His own perception was closer to the Muʿtazilī position, which argues that not to recognize God's self-imposed limitations is to claim that the world is being continually recreated.[92] For the Muʿtazilīs, the idea that God would circumvent divinely appointed rules contravened the very possibility of justice. Sayyid Ahmad's *necharī* philosophy resurrected the recurrent theological dilemma of predetermination and free will.

Evidence from the 'new sciences' confirmed for Sayyid Ahmad this pre-existing philosophical paradigm. In other words, developments in the physical sciences were demonstrating what had already been theorized. In Sayyid Ahmad's understanding, the European theists and 'Broad Churchmen' were not breaking new ground, but rather coming to terms with ideas developed by earlier Muslim thinkers. The synthesis accomplished by Persianate philosophers was that revelation occurs within a cohesive system. Sayyid Ahmad's distinction between original and created principles, for example, can be traced to Walī Allāh's notion of that whereas original (*aṣl*) principles are immutable, created principles are inherently flexible so that they may change according to historical circumstances.[93] That which is best for the common good (*maṣlaḥa*) in a society varies with customs, times and languages, so the notion of *sharīʿa* must be understood to be inherently flexible. This guidance is at once revealed and deduced, for it is derived from secondary principles. In his assessment of the salvific claims of other religious traditions, Sayyid Ahmad built upon this

91 Ḥālī, *Hayāt-i Javed*, 547.

92 Naumkin, 'Some Problems', 124. Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazali and the Qur'an: One Book, Many Meanings* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

93 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xxii; Amanat, 'Mujtahids and Missionaries', 261. Amanat explores the similarity between Shāh Walī Allāh's views and those of the Iranian Uṣūlī thinker, Āqā Muḥammad ʿAlī Bihbahānī (1732–1801) of Shiraz.

distinction in order to support the idea of the simultaneous efficacy of more than one covenantal system. As he states in *Tabyīn* Parts 1 and 3, the doctrines instituted by the legislative prophets cannot be either abrogated or superseded. These are also transferable. As described in *Aḥkām ṭa'ām ahl-i kitāb*, Christian and Jewish dietary regulations are licit for Muslims because they are acceptable to God.

4 Conclusion

Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings were consistent with the logical progression of this vein of Muslim thinkers in the Persianate Indian milieu. Luminaries associated with the Raḥīmiyya School remain well recognized within the South Asian mainstream and their seminal influence shaped the trajectory of Sayyid Ahmad's scholarship in general, and his dicision to undertake a direct scriptural study in particular. It also conditioned his approach to translation and interpretation. Natural science may have stimulated Sayyid Ahmad's exploration of philosophy, but he embarked on this quest with the trademark Raḥīmiyya assurance that all can ultimately be reconciled.[94] Sayyid Ahmad's affinity with Muslim philosophy and theology is well documented, as is the central role played by Shāh Walī Allāh in reinvigorating the study of these subjects in India. One consequence of this strong association is to dispel misconceptions that Sayyid Ahmad's religious ideas in general, and on revelation in particular, were the result of an infatuation with European ideas that were foreign to authentic Muslim tradition. He progressed towards a logical extreme, but nevertheless, as Bashir Dar concludes, '[he] maintained all the common distinctions held by Muslim theologians'.[95] Christian Troll concurs with Dar's assessment, but adds the correction that Sayyid Ahmad actually worked more closely in line with Muslim philosophers rather than theologians.[96] Although some of Sayyid Ahmad' views are original, still it is worth recalling Muda Ismail Abd Rahman's admonition that they should not be quickly dismissed 'because they do not essentially depart from the teachings of Islam even though they have not found favour in many Muslim minds'.[97] Even so, they challenge some of the constricted parameters accepted by much of the academy today regarding what constitutes the normative Islamic view of revelation.

94 Hermansen, *Rewriting Sufi Identify*, xxii.
95 Dar, *Religious Thought*, 92.
96 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 288.
97 Abd Rahman, 'Interpretation of the Birth of Jesus', 30.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

In these chapters we have set out to explore Sayyid Ahmad Khan's extensive writings on the Bible as recorded primarily in *Tabyīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-Tawrāt wa-l-Inǰīl ʿalā millat al-Islām* (Elucidation of the word in commentary on the Torah and Gospel according to the religion of Islam). The study has been structured around the central question of how Sayyid Ahmad conceptualized the prophetic revelation encountered in the Bible. Following a brief summation, we shall also consider some potential contributions of Sayyid Ahmad's work to the field of Muslim-Christian relations.

Novelist and historian Shamsur Rahman Faruqi captured the complexity of Sayyid Ahmad's legacy in a lecture at Aligarh Muslim University. 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a saviour,' he stated, 'a sage, and a political-social leader of tremendous credibility … who gave [to the Muslim community] a feeling of self-confidence, which had been lost apparently forever'.[1] *Tabyīn al-kalām* is a window into the mind of this wise figure at such a critical juncture in Muslim – Christian relations; and yet it has remained one of Sir Sayyid's least understood works. As the study progressed, I became increasingly intrigued by the manner in which Sayyid Ahmad conceptualized the idea of revelation, and by his notion of the shared 'Abrahamic religion' (*millat-i Ibrahīm*). The identification of his paradigm opened the way for a clearer understanding not only of our author's exceptionally positive attitude towards the Bible, but also of his expansive view of how the divine is at work in the world.

1 How Did Sayyid Ahmad Conceptualize Prophetic Revelation in the Bible?

Sayyid Ahmad applied a clear method to conceptualize prophetic revelation, whether found in the Bible, the Qur'an or Hadith. He applied a specific taxonomy from the science of tradition (*ʿilm-i ḥadīth*) that was derived from the works of the eminent jurist Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (d. 820), and which continues in mainstream use today.[2] The taxonomy classified the revealed word of God

1 Faruqi, *From Antiquary to Social Revolutionary*, 3.

2 For a contemporary usage on an international level, see Kamaruddin Amin, 'Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslim's Ṣaḥīḥ: A Critical Study of his Method' *Islamic Law and Society* 11

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(*kalām ilāhī* or *waḥy*) as either *matlū* or *ghayr matlū*. The term *matlū* was derived from the Arabic *tilāwa*, literally meaning to recite, or to authoritatively rehearse.[3] Unlike other mechanisms for describing the interrelation of the Qur'an and Hadith, this taxonomy was applied specifically to convey the organic equivalence shared by the Qur'an and Sunna, the latter being composed of incontrovertibly sound Hadith. As Abdullah Saeed explains, this taxonomy recognized the Qur'an and Sunna as having equal religio-ethical authority.[4] Hence, the difference between *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* revelation was one of form and function, not of substance.

Translating the meaning of these technical terms was a challenge for Sayyid Ahmad, and it continues to be so for interpreters today. I have appreciated Farid Esack's rendition of *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* as rehearsed and unrehearsed, mainly because it reflects Sayyid Ahmad's concern for substance, form and function. One definition of to rehearse is 'to recite authoritatively' (*iqra'*), the command to the Prophet of Islam in Q 96. This usage allows for an additional meaning as well, one that acknowledges the liturgical function of the Qur'an in the life of the community, entailing continuity, and the expectation of formulaic consistency not only in word, but also in cadence and metre for use in the performance of worship. One finds that this translation more accurately represents Sayyid Ahmad's application rather than the distinction between verbatim and non-verbatim, as these terms have been rendered elsewhere.

Sayyid Ahmad worked within al-Shāfiʿī's framework, but he also added greater detail. He subdivided the category of *matlū* revelation into two kinds, wording (*lafẓ*) and content (*maḍmūn*). In the first, the recipient rehearses the 'pure words' spoken by God in revelation. In the second, the recipient rehearses the 'pure content' spoken by God in revelation.[5] *Ghayr matlū* revelation, however, is articulated through intermediaries who serve as inspired 'sacred historians' (*muqaddas muʾarrikh*). As seen in Imām Rāghib Isfāhānī's definition of *ghayr*, that which is *mukhtalif* (different) is always *ghayr*, but that which is *ghayr* is not always *mukhtalif*.[6] Both *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* are *waḥy* and therefore share the same substance (*jawhar*). *Ghayr* refers to 'another' kind of revelation, rather than to something that is 'other' than revelation. Sayyid

(2004): 149–176; and in a South Asian context, see Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Salafī, *Ḥujjat-i Ḥadīth* (Lahore: Islamic Publishing House, 1981), or Abdurraḥman Kīlānī, *Difāʿi Ḥadīth* (Lahore: Dar al-Andalus, 1999).

3 Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 1–15; Esack, 111.

4 Saeed, 'Rethinking "Revelation"'; idem, *Interpreting the Qur'ān*, 31–33; Esack, *The Qur'an*, 111–113.

5 TK, 2: 349.

6 Isfahānī, *Al-Mufradāt*, 147.

Ahmad capitalized upon the fact that, throughout most of Muslim interpretative history, the value of Sunna as revelation overshadowed concern for its form. Sunna, which is in essence revelation, has been affirmed as authoritative largely upon the strength of chains of transmission and despite being *ghayr matlū*.

Sayyid Ahmad's originality is seen in his application of these categories to revelation in the Bible. The Bible contains a blend of *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* revelation. *Matlū* revelation, whether of word or content, was classified as *matn* (text), the 'backbone' of revelation. *Ghayr matlū* revelation, on the other hand, also contains contextualizing narrative (*riwāyat*). The Qur'an consists only of *matlū* and is therefore completely *matn*. Sunna, however, is predominantly *ghayr matlū*, and contains both text and contextualizing narrative. The Bible, like Sunna, also contains both *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* revelation and is thus a combination of *matn* and *riwāyat*. Regardless of the differences in form, and in the function of these texts in religious practice, both *matlū* and *ghayr matlū* are of the same substance (*jawhar*). The terms describe the word of God, spoken and otherwise.

The application of this taxonomy valued revelation in the Bible as equal in authoritaty to that in the Qur'an. In *Tabyīn* Part 1, Discourse Three, this is clarified in no uncertain terms, 'God protect us [from Satan] (*Naʿūdhu bi-llāh*)! The revelation of the earlier (*sābiqīn*) prophets is no less than that which was granted to the Prophet Muḥammad'.[7] Sayyid Ahmad specified that Muslims should not qualify *matlū* revelation as of greater worth than *ghayr matlū* because they are both of divine origin and 'in matters of religion, both are equal' (*dīn kā muʿamlah main, donon barābar hain*). This is an unequivocal assessment of the value of Biblical revelation in relation to that of the Qur'an.

Thus, as explored in Chapter 4, Sayyid Ahmad functionally expanded the canon of scripture in Islam to include the Bible. In matters of universal religiosity (*dīn*), or the elements that are everlasting and unabrogatable, the Bible and the Qur'an are of equivalent value. Secondary principles, those pertaining to doctrine (*sharīʿa*), differ but they are inherently flexible and will continue to morph in response to human development. But in the essential universal elements, the Bible and the Qur'an are equivalent in authority and jointly testify to the central message of *tawḥīd*, the integrative and monotheistic 'Oneness' of God. This is the cornerstone of Sayyid Ahmad's attitude towards the Bible.

Further investigation prompted our awareness that the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construct differentiated between Hadith and Sunna. In *Al-khuṭubāt al-Aḥmadiya*, Sayyid Ahmad specifies that Sunna is authoritative if established

7 TK, 1: 24.

through incontrovertible Hadith. The difficulty for his, as it had been for the Muʿtazilī opponents to the *matlū*/*ghayr matlū* construct in the ninth through eleventh centuries, lay in sifting between the controvertible and the incontrovertible. The Bible and the Qurʾan, in Sayyid Ahmad's estimation, do not share this degree of uncertainty and are accepted in their present form as authentic and reliable. As described in Chapter 5 (The Coherence of Revelation), the discourse on the authority of Sunna in this context was a product of Mujaddidī scripturalism. There was a characteristic approach to religious study in Delhi that stimulated the vernacular translation of primary texts – first to Persian and then to Urdu. These works were in themselves momentous, and this approach was carried forward in Sayyid Ahmad's fragmentary translation of the Qurʾan within *Tafsīr*.

In summation, Sayyid Ahmad's positive assessment of the Bible has had an understated yet enduring impact on Urdu Qurʾanic exegesis. According to Surāya Ḥusayn, as a result of Sayyid Ahmad's influence it is not uncommon to see Biblical passages directly quoted in Urdu commentaries on the Qurʾan.[8] As ʿAbd al-Majīd Daryābādī (d. 1977), perhaps the most prominent Urdu exegete (*mufassir*) of the twentieth century, reflected in his commentary of the Qurʾan, 'God forgive Sayyid Ahmad for the work he has done. He has revised 1400 years of history for the Christians and taken upon himself the task of exonerating Jews and Christians for their tampering with Scripture'.[9] Though Daryābādī – like many modern thinkers in India – remained unconvinced by Sayyid Ahmad's estimation of the Bible's authority, he frequently included Biblical quotations that evidence extensive and thoughtful interaction in his work as well. Though the attitudes of Urdu exegetes differ considerably, in light of the historical paucity of engagement with the Biblical text, as noted by Griffith and Saeed, the fact of such exploration is in itself noteworthy.[10] It remains to be seen whether there will be further progress in Muslim Biblical exegesis in this coming generation.

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8 Ḥusayn, *Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān*, 116. For example, for a founding figure of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement, see Abū l-Vafā Thanā Allāh Amritsarī, *Qurʾān-i karīm mutarjam ma tafsīr-i Thanāʾī muqamal* (Lahore: Mian Abdul Majid, 1994). For a mainstream modernist, see ʿAbd al-Majīd Daryābādī, *Tafsīr Majīdī* (Karachi: Majlis-i Nashariāti Qurʾān, 1998), cited in Christian W. Troll, 'A Note on the *Tafsīr-i Thanāʾī* of Thanā Allāh Amritsarī and His Criticism of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Tafsīr-i Aḥmadī*', *Islamic Culture* 49 (1985): 29–44.

9 Daryābādī, *Tafsīr Majīdī*, 169–170.

10 Sydney Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the 'People of the Book' in the Language of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 175–203; Abdullah Saeed, 'How Muslims View the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment?', in Joseph A. Camilleri Luca Anceschi, Ruwan Palapathwala, and Andrew Wicking, eds, *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 191–210.

2 What Did Sayyid Ahmad Understand Himself to Be Doing in *Tabyīn*?

Tabyīn was part of a journey of hermeneutical exploration to understand the universal genius of the Qur'an. This was a long route through the Bible and into the mind of British Christians, from where he would return not only with a better understanding of the other tradition, but also with a deeper sense of self and of his own faith community. As the philosopher Paul Ricœur keenly observed, it is in relation to others that one becomes more confidently cognizant of the self: 'What has been understated is how I have knowledge of myself not merely relative to others, but in relation to others'.[11] Through these encounters, the story of the 'other' becomes inextricably intertwined with one's own. In writing *Tabyīn*, Sayyid Ahmad was journaling a courageous journey of discovery.

The plethora of references cited both in the text and on the margins indicates that Sayyid Ahmad commenced his exegesis of Genesis with the whole Bible in mind, including the Apostolic Epistles, the historical writings in the Acts of the Apostles, and John's Book of Revelation.[12] 'The *anājīl* [pl. of *Injīl*] and writings of the *tābiʿīn*,' he states, 'are based on the testimony of the Apostles (*ḥawāriyyīn*) and are all subsumed in the Qur'anic term *injīl*'.[13] In his estimation, these were writings composed by inspired authors, who were recipients of prophetic revelation (*ṣāḥib-i waḥy, ṣāḥib-i ilhām*) and whose writings are worthy of action (*wājib al-ʿamal*). Though these were not legislative prophets, as in Ibn 'Arabī's distinction, and they cannot institute doctrine (*sharīʿa*) in their own right, their inspired writings nevertheless contain light useful in elucidating the Qur'an. *Tabyīn* was part of a life-long quest to understand how God's word – spoken and otherwise – becomes expressed in the human realm.

Journeying along this hermeneutical path, Sayyid Ahmad identified the need for principles to delineate the 'soundness and unsoundness' of scriptural interpretation. The path was far more complex than he realized, and the journey more arduous. There were so many sources, and such diversity of perspective. As he explained in his letter to Mohsin ul-Mulk in 1892, 'But as long as the principles are not agreed upon in the manner I have described, objections and writings and questions and answers seem simply futile, and this

11 Brown, 'On Narrative and Belonging', 110.

12 For a sample list, see Troll, Ramsey, and Mughal, *Gospel According to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 375–379.

13 TK, 1: 31.

is waste of precious time'.[14] He affirmed the finality of the Qur'an as the culmination of scriptural prophecy, but also as revelation that assumed its recipient audience was familiar with the preceding scriptures. He needed keys to open these truths, and he was convinced that these were interlocked. Together the Bible and the Qur'an could elucidate the 'word of God' spoken into the realm of human history.

Sayyid Ahmad also subcribed to the coherence of natural and prophetic revelation. As set forth in his commentary on Genesis 1, he believed that all revelation originated from the one 'word', spoken by the singular divine source, which is continually expressed in the processes of creation. In Sayyid Ahmad's view, prophecy is a form of revelation; thus, it too conforms to the 'law of nature' established in creation. Prophecy proceeds through human faculties, is intended for guidance, and is reconcilable with reason. This allows for a juxtaposition of prophetic testimony, and parity between the Bible and the Qur'an, because they proceed from the same source and are constrained by the same forces. Together, these records of revelation elucidate the word (*tabyīn al-kalām*) that has reverberated from the beginning of history. The chorus of prophetic revelation testifies that God's '*vurd*' (Urdu transliteration of word) begets God's '*vurk*' (work). The one conforms to the other without contradiction, for the word is in the work, and the work is in the word. This is the message within the message.

Sayyid Ahmad's assessment of the Bible was conditioned by the presumed coherence of natural and prophetic revelation. The interpretative paradigm applied in *Tabyīn* is undergirded by acceptance of Ibn ʿArabī's 'Unity of Being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), as restated in each of *Tabyīn*'s three parts to introduce its author's view of metaphysics. As William Chittick adeptly explains, *waḥdat al-wujūd* is better described as the 'Unity of Discovery' because it underscores the spiritual nature of the discussion. Muslim philosophers have often been perceived as drawing a hard-and-fast line separating God from the cosmos, as Fazlur Rahman explains, but for them the world continued to be permeated with the divine attributes and the outworking of the divine will. The spiritually vigilant remain attentive to discover signs of the divine in all experience. Theirs is a God-soaked world where the divine is ever-present, even if only ephemerally perceived.

This worldview was one conducive to the explorations set out in *Tabyīn*. As quoted in its introduction, for Sayyid Ahmad the cosmos resounds with God's word, spoken and otherwise. In the beginning was the word, doubtlessly begotten (*paidā*) – the heavens and the earth – by your cherisher Allāh; in the

14 Khan, 'Principles of Exegesis', 335.

beginning God begot the heavens and the earth.[15] This is the startling difference between the early Indian accounts of creation in Persian and Urdu. In the Arabic, God created (*khalaq*) rather than generated the heavens and the earth.[16] But this was Mughal India, home to a dynamic centre of theological enquiry. This was a spiritual and intellectual environment conducive to Sayyid Ahmad's assumption that prophetic and natural revelation testify to a unified eternal truth.

To summarize, for Sayyid Ahmad, nature was generated from a single substance (*jawhar*) that progressed into ever-greater complexity. The observable complexity of nature emanates from the simplicity of divine singularity. The expressed word evolved within the bounds of the created cosmos, for nature is, by definition, God's nature (*fiṭrat Allāh*).[17] The cosmos is a symbiotic system infused with divine attributes and the challenge for the faithful is to sustain the paradox (*mutnāqiẓ bi l-dhāt*) of divine transcendence and immanence so as to avoid the extremes of monistic pantheism and deistic absence. As posited by Shāh Ismāʿīl and other Delhi sages, the balance is sustained if the divine essence (*dhāt*) remains utterly separate from the substance of creation.[18] God, the 'true being (*wujūd*)', is beyond human imagination. That which can be known of God is revealed in the created cosmos.

Sayyid Ahmad sought a reasonable explanation for how revelation could occur within the closed order of creation. The scriptural accounts indicated that revelation was spoken at creation. The 'word', or all that was to be revealed, was spoken at creation. God's word, and all divine attributes, exist in this substance. There were specially gifted persons in every generation who could interpret or 'receive' this revelation (*waḥy*). They were as different from others persons as animals are from humans, but even they struggled (*ijtihād*) against the selfish ego (*nafs*) and base desires (*ḥayawān*) to discover and decode the divine word and provide humanity with wise counsel. Prophets deciphered the word of God (*kalām ilāhī*) in different ways. Sometimes it was received as inspired words and sometimes as inspired content (*alfāẓ*/*maḍmūn*). But

15 This idea is not without precedent in Christian thought as well. Ideas pertaining to the *logoi spermatikoi* in Greek, or *rationes seminales* in Latin, the germinal or seminal reasons, have been traced as a theological origin of the species. Helmig, *Forms and Concepts*, 43, 160.

16 The theme of God's 'birthing' the world and then the church, has deep roots in ancient Christianity, which co-inhabited with Muslims much of the Persianate world. See Thomas Andrew Bennett, *Labor of God: The Agony of the Cross as the Birth of the Church* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017). Bennett calls for a reassessment of the atonement that renders God consistent 'from creation to new creation'.

17 Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 3.

18 Faruque, 'Sufism *contra* Shariah?', 56.

ultimately, these differences were overshadowed by their commonality as vessels of revelation. Prophecy was the human reception and expression of the divinely implanted. There is a fundamental coherence, therefore, that overshadows the obvious differences within the records, and this coherence facilitates the critical analysis and inter-textual juxtaposition of the Bible, the Qur'an and Sunna.

Sayyid Ahmad was driven to explore and test the boundaries. Exploration entails risk. One recurring concern for the Muslim reader is whether affirmation of the Bible somehow devalues the Qur'an. Similar allegations were made, for example, against the Cairene *mufassir* al-Biqā'ī because of his extensive use of the Bible in Qur'anic exegesis.[19] There is a notion that these are competing scriptures and that to honour the one is to dishonour the other. Sayyid Ahmad did not apprehend scripture in this manner; rather, he perceived the Bible as good company for the Qur'an. In his mind, one can simultaneously affirm the Qur'an's corrective challenge to Christians and Jews, and still take seriously the Qur'anic exhortation to seek knowledge from the 'Scripture people' (*ahl al-kitāb*). He was not compelled to devalue one in order to reverence the other.

One result of Sayyid Ahmad's view of revelation is that he finds an equivalence between the Bible and the Qur'an, as demonstrated in *Tabyīn*. For those who ascribe to a view of verbatim revelation, and disavow human involvement, the struggle will remain to explain how a perfect Qur'an could commend an imperfect Bible. Therein lies the conundrum that Sayyid Ahmad confronted. If the Qur'an is completely a divine act – an intrusion into the cosmos – any human participation opens the possibility of error. Sayyid Ahmad, however, like Shāh Walī Allāh and apparently many of his rationalist predecessors, understood the contingent nature of prophecy whereby the divinely initiated was accomplished through human response. The fundamental reason for this was that prophetic revelation did not exist apart from creation. The miraculous exists within the confines of the cosmos, and this inherent vulnerability is wondrous.

In conclusion, I have emphasized the philosophical reasons that prompted Sayyid Ahmad's religious writings in general, and the *Tabyīn* in particular. There were practical reasons as well, but we find these alone would not have been sufficient to stimulate or sustain the substantial personal investment entailed in this effort. Sayyid Ahmad set about writing the *Tabyīn* because he was convinced that the Bible shared in the same divinely imparted truth as the Qur'an. Concomitant with this belief was the hope that a critical study of foundational sources would alleviate communal tensions between Muslims

19 See Saleh, *In Defence of the Bible*.

and Christians. In this way, Sayyid Ahmad predicted a similar conclusion to that reached by the late philosopher Mohamed Arkoun, who wrote that 'any progress in the great debate of civilizations will only come through work at the roots: the original sources'.[20] *Tabyīn* exemplifies working 'at the root' during one of the darkest periods of Christian – Muslim confrontation in India. For Sayyid Ahmad, it was untenable for religious thinkers to proceed with unreflected insistence upon earlier positions and expect beneficial progress. 'What route will we travel,' as Marianne Moyaert enquired, 'what path will we take – that of Cartesian rationalism in search of certitude, or that of humanist not-knowing in search of wisdom?'[21] Through faith, Sayyid Ahmad predicted that in time all would be made clear, but until then we lay hold of the principles embedded in scripture and find the resources needed to press towards the furthest boundaries (*ghāyat ḥadd*) of human flourishing.[22]

20 Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. Robert D. Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 53.

21 Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other*, 16.

22 TK, 3: 110.

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