The Limits of Tradition: Competing Logics of Authenticity in South Asian Islam
by
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Religion in the Graduate School of Duke University 2012
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This dissertation is a critical exploration of certain authoritative discursive traditions on the limits of Islam in 19th century North India. It investigates specific moments when prominent Indian Muslim scholars articulated and contested the boundaries of what should and should not count as Islam. This study does not provide a chronological history of Islam in colonial India or that of Indian Muslim reform. Rather, it examines critical conjunctures of native debates and polemics in which the question of what knowledges, beliefs, and practices should constitute Islam was authoritatively contested. Taking 19th century Indian Muslim identity as its object of inquiry, it interrogates how the limits of identity and difference, the normative and the heretical, were battled out in centrally visible ways.

The set of illustrations that form the focus of this dissertation come from an ongoing polemic that erupted among some members of the Muslim intellectual elite in colonial India. At the heart of this polemic was the question of how one should understand the relationship between divine sovereignty, prophetic authority, and the limits of normative practice in everyday life. The rival protagonists of this polemic responded to this question in dramatically contrasting ways. One the one hand was a group of scholars whose conception of tradition pivoted on establishing the exceptionality of divine sovereignty. In order to achieve this task, they articulated an imaginary of Prophet Muhammad that emphasized his humanity and his subservience to the sovereign divine.

They also assailed ritual practices and everyday habits that in their view undermined divine sovereignty or that elevated the Prophet in a way that shed doubts on his humanity. One of the chief architects of this reform project was the early 19th century Indian
Muslim thinker, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl (d.1831). His reformist agenda was carried forward in the latter half of the century by the pioneers of the Deoband School, an Islamic seminary cum ideological formation established in the North Indian town of Deoband in 1867. Another group of influential North Indian Muslim scholars sharply challenged this movement of reform.

They argued that divine sovereignty was inseparable from the authority of the Prophet as the most charismatic and authorial being. In their view, divine and prophetic exceptionality mutually reinforced each other. Moreover, undermining the distinguished status of the Prophet by projecting him as a mere human who also happened to be a recipient of divine revelation represented anathema. As a corollary, these scholars vigorously defended rituals and everyday practices that served as a means to honor the Prophet’s memory and charisma. This counter reformist movement was spearheaded by the influential Indian Muslim thinker Aḥmad Razā Khān (d.1921). He was the founder of the Barelvī School, another ideological group that flourished in late 19th century North India.

This dissertation describes these rival narratives of tradition and reform in South Asian Islam by focusing on three pivotal questions of doctrinal disagreement: 1) the limits of prophetic intercession (shafā‘at), 2) the limits of heretical innovation (bid‘a), and 3) the limits of the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown (‘ilm al-ghayb). It argues that these intra-Muslim contestations were animated by competing political theologies each of which generated discrete and competing imaginaries of law and boundaries of ritual practice.
Dedication

In honor of Brian Charles Lara, a magician with the cricket bat who continues to inspire.
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Introduction

On January 10, 2011, the anti-terrorism court of Pakistan sentenced a local prayer leader (Imām) from the town of Muzaffargarh, Muḥammad Shafi‘and his son Muḥammad Aslam to life-in-prison on charges of blasphemy. They were originally arrested in April 2010 after being accused of removing from their family owned grocery store a poster that advertised an event to commemorate Prophet Muḥammad’s birthday.

According to the organizers of this event, who had also filed the case in court, Shafi‘and Aslam tore down the poster and trampled it under their feet.† The father and son were charged under Pakistan’s controversial blasphemy law. In theory the law prohibits blasphemy against any recognized religion. In practice, however, it is mostly applied against individuals found guilty of insulting the Prophet. The penalty can range from punitive fines to the death sentence, although the latter has never been formally implemented.

The court verdict against Shafi‘and Aslam was delivered six days after the much publicized assassination of Salmān Tāseer, the governor of the state of Punjab. Tāseer was shot dead by his own bodyguard, a man named Mumtāz Qādrī who was driven to crime because he believed the governor committed a sin in opposing the blasphemy law. Following this high-profile assassination, several politicians, lawyers, and human rights activists in Pakistan decried the blasphemy law. They called the blasphemy law an unjust legislation that incited sectarian/interreligious violence and that was mostly used as a pretext to settle personal vendettas. Joining this chorus of protests against the law was ‘Ārif Ghurmānī, the defense counsel for Shafi‘and Aslam. Concomittantly

† *Dawn,* “Court Convicts Imam and Son for Blasphemy,” January 11, 2011.
He claimed his clients had been unfairly prosecuted. In his view, his clients were victims of “intra-faith rivalries” among Sunnī Muslims. Ghurmānī said, “Both (the accusers and the accused) are Muslims. The case is the result of differences between Deobandī and Barelvī sects of Sunnī Muslims… Shafī‘ is a practicing Muslim, he is the Imām of a mosque and he had recently returned from pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia…. I am defending them because I am convinced they are not guilty of blasphemy.”\(^2\) His clients belonged to the Deobandī sect.

The “intra-faith rivalry between the Deobandī and Barelvī sects of Sunnī Islam” that Ghurmānī referred to represents a vexing yet important set of polemics between prominent Muslim scholars that date back to late 19th century North India. Much like the controversy generated by Shafī‘s alleged act of defiling an advertisement for the Prophet’s birthday celebration, this nineteenth century polemic animated opposing imaginaries of prophetic charisma in South Asian Islam. It brought into view an ethical question that has captured the imagination of Muslims for several centuries: how should a community honor the Prophet’s memory and normative example? This dissertation is about that polemical battle in colonial India that continues to haunt the religious sensibilities of post-colonial South Asian Muslims in important and often unpredictable ways.

**Context and Conceptual Theme:**

Conceptually, this dissertation is a critical exploration of certain authoritative discursive traditions on the limits of Islam in 19th century North India. It investigates specific moments when prominent Indian Muslim scholars articulated and contested the boundaries of what should and should not count as Islam. This study does not provide a

\(^2\) Ibid
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They argued that divine sovereignty was inseparable from the authority of the Prophet as the most charismatic and authorial being. In their view, divine and prophetic exceptionality mutually reinforced each other. Moreover, undermining the distinguished status of the Prophet by projecting him as a mere human who also happened to be a recipient of divine revelation represented anathema. As a corollary, these scholars vigorously defended rituals and everyday practices that served as a means to honor the Prophet’s memory and charisma.

This counter reformist movement was spearheaded by the influential Indian Muslim thinker Aḥmad Razā Khān (d.1921). He was the founder of the Barelvī School, another ideological group that flourished in late 19th century North India. The Barelvī ideology was named after the town of Baraylī in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh where Khān was born. I will introduce these scholars and their ideological programs in much greater detail later. For now it will suffice to mention that they were among the most prolific, widely followed, and contentious figures in modern South Asian Islam who were both prominent jurists and Sufi masters. These rival ideologies of reform contributed to one of the most abrasive and intensely fought out polemical battles in the history of South Asian Islam. Their showdown has produced a fair number of oral and written polemics, rebuttals and counter-rebuttals, juridical and theological pronouncements of anathema (takfīr), and traditions of storytelling that valorize some scholars and caricature their rivals. The discursive space of this polemic is occupied by a myriad of interconnected questions.
For instance, how must a community organize its life in a way that demonstrated its subservience to a sovereign divine? What is the nature of the Prophet’s authority as a mediator between God and humans, in his capacity as an intercessor on the Day of Judgment? What kind of knowledge did the Prophet possess; did he have access to knowledge of the unknown? What was the normative status of rituals, devotional practices, and everyday habits that lacked a precedent from the practice of the Prophet and his Companions? Under what conditions did such practices become heretical? How was that decided? These questions were situated at the interstices of law, theology, and everyday practice in Islam. I will argue that this polemic was animated by competing political theologies each of which generated discrete and competing imaginaries of law and boundaries of ritual practice.

Almost two hundred years later, the questions and debates that captured the imagination of these 19th century actors continue to generate passionate reactions. The original players in this polemic have passed on. However, as the narrative with which I began clearly shows, their specters continue to haunt the topography of South Asian Islam in important ways. The onset of the digital age has further aggrandized the intensity and the geographic scope of this polemic. On various websites and polemical chat-rooms—populated by both native and Diaspora South Asian Muslims from such places as the US, UK, and South Africa—rival ideologies and opinions are incessantly discussed, debated, dissected, and repudiated. Far from having evaporated, over the years, this polemic has only gone viral. This dissertation examines fragments of some canonical discursive moments attached to this polemic during its early years.

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Conceptually, this work represents an interrogation of authoritative discourses invested in strategically controlling the boundaries of religion. The concept of authoritative discourse in the view of the anthropologist Talal Asad is described as:

Materially founded discourse which seeks continually to preempt the space of radically opposed utterances and so prevent them from being uttered. For authoritative discourse, we should be careful to note, authorises neither "Reality" nor "experience" but other discourse-texts, speech, visual images etc. which are structured in terms of given (imposed) concepts, and reproduced in terms of essential meanings. Even when action is authorized, it is as discourse that such action establishes its authority. The action is read as being authorised, but the reading and the action are not identical—that is why it is always logically possible to have an alternative reading.4

Asad’s idea of authoritative discourse is very useful in thinking about the terrain in which opposing discourses seek to exclude one another from the boundaries of “normative” or “authoritatively sanctioned” forms of life and thought. Building on Asad’s work, in this dissertation, I investigate ways in which a discursive tradition-19th century North Indian Islam-was invested with competing meanings and ideological projects in specific conjunctures of authoritative discourses and debates. I examine moments in the career of Islam in colonial India when its limits were authoritatively contested in centrally visible ways.

Contribution to the Field:

There are two main problems with the current state of scholarship on Indian Muslim reform that have propelled me to write this dissertation. First, despite the recent emergence of several excellent studies on Muslim reform movements in colonial India, the religious thought of important native actors remains severely underexplored. In these works one finds a much greater emphasis on the social, institutional, and political histories of South Asian Islam in comparison to its textual traditions. As a result, our understanding of the thick description, the narratives and internal contestations on the meanings and limits of reform continues to be sketchy and driven by unhelpful generalizations. Take for instance the Barelvī-Deobandī polemic.

It is generally known that Deobandī scholars objected to rituals such as the Prophet’s birthday celebration (mawlid) while the Barelvīs defended such practices. But the question of how they assembled their arguments on such contentious problems has not received any sustained attention. What was at stake for these rival scholars in whether the


6 Muhammad Qasim Zaman’s pioneering work *Custodians of Change: The ‘Ulama in Contemporary Islam* represents an important exception to this trend. With coverage of both Arabic and Urdu sources, this book is much more attuned to the complexity of Muslim scholarly discourses in South Asia. It mostly focuses however on the post-colonial context of traditionally educated Muslim scholars in Pakistan. Zaman’s more recent book on the prominent late 19th and 20th century Deoband thinker Ashraf ‘Ali Thanvi (d.1944) *Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008) deals with Islam in colonial India more directly. In this dissertation I build on this work by examining hitherto unexplored aspects of Thanvi’s thought in some depth (see chapter 2).
Prophet’s birthday was celebrated or not? Through what discursive strategies did they authorize their own ideological program and unauthorize competing narratives of tradition? What conceptions of law, history, and temporality informed their social imaginaries? What are some of the ambiguities and points of fissure found in their discourses?

These are the kinds of questions that are pivotal to developing a richer narrative of Indian Muslim reform as a discursive tradition. Currently, the thought of critical Indian Muslim reformers who were central to this tradition remains peripheral in Western academic discourses. The early 19th century scholars Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d.1862) are good examples. As I will show in chapter 1, a polemic between Ismā‘īl and Khayrābādī on the limits of prophetic intercession (shafā‘at) represented a crucial conjuncture in the narrative of intra-Muslim contestations in colonial India.

To this day, Ismā‘īl remains a deeply polarizing figure who is the subject of countless refutations and apologetics. However, despite his importance to the Indian Muslim reform tradition, the primary Western source on his religious and political thought is a 1979 dissertation (recently published as a book) by former historian Harlon Pearson. Though an impressive work, Pearson’s analysis is largely based on British official documents rather than on primary religious texts. Therefore, despite some sporadic discussions of

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7 Pearson left the academy to work in the private sector soon after completing his dissertation at Duke University, Department of History.
native religious discourses, he is unable to offer a detailed or complicated picture of their internal logics, aspirations, and ambiguities.

More generally, the study of Muslim scholarly traditions remains at a relatively infant stage in the field of South Asian Studies. In a recent article, Ebrahim Moosa aptly summed up this situation when he wrote:

Historians of Islam in colonial India…will be the first to admit that they skate on the thinnest of ice if they claim to enjoy a complex knowledge of the ‘Ulama’ tradition in the region. Until recently, historians focused almost exclusively on cosmopolitan figures relevant to colonial and national politics, such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University, Muhammad Iqbal, the poet-philosopher interred in Lāhore, Abul Kalam Azad, the pre-eminent Muslim figure in the Indian National Congress or Muhammad ‘Ali Jinnah, the first Governor-General of Pakistan…Some five decades ago, it would have been rare to find in European sources any sustained discussion of the role of traditional religious scholars in the development of religious thought in South Asia. While some ‘Ulama’ were involved in the 1857 revolt, and the name of Fazl-i Haqq Khayrabadi is mentioned prominently, very little was said about his biography, scholarly work and the way he shadowed theological developments in twentieth century Muslim India…The work of traditional scholars deserve(s) scrutiny to build a more comprehensive picture of Islam as a discursive tradition in South Asia.⁹

Responding to this complaint, this dissertation brings into view the discourses of important 19th century Indian Muslim reformers through an examination of texts that have hitherto not received the attention they deserve. But apart from rudimentary attention to scholarly texts and discourses, there is another more serious problem in the study of Indian Muslim reform (and perhaps that of Muslim reform more generally) that this dissertation seeks to redress.

I am thinking here of the tendency to approach opposing imaginaries of tradition and its limits through such binaries as law/mysticism, traditionalism/modernism, reformist/rationalist, and so forth. I argue that such binaries and the individual categories

that comprise them are conceptually unsound. The problem with these binaries is that they canonize the limits of tradition and reform prior to the conjunctures of contestation in which those limits become centrally visible as objects of authoritative discourse. Again scholarship on the Barelvī-Deobandī polemic is instructive.

This polemic is often conceptualized as a rivalry between legal reformists (Deobandīs) and populist mystics (Barelvīs) driven by an innate antagonism between law and Sufism in Islam. Take for instance anthropologist Pnina Werbner’s article on South Asian Muslim immigrants in Britain “The Making of Muslim Dissent: Hybridized Discourses, Lay Preachers, and Radical Rhetoric among British Pakistanis.” In this article, centered on the articulation of sectarian identities among Diaspora South Asian Muslims in Britain, Werbner described the contrast between the Deobandī and Barelvī schools as follows:

For Deobandis…the stress on individual rationality as individual self-control is accompanied by an emphasis on legal reasoning (as against the mystical knowledge of the Sufis)…The [Deobandi] reform movement met with powerful organized opposition in defense of Sufi saints and cultic practices (emphasis mine) surrounding saints’ tombs. This counterreformation has come to be known as the Barelwi movement …Thus, in South Asia at least two classes of “learned doctors” have emerged…reformer jurists and saintly jurists [who are] locked in continuous religious controversy.

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10 I have borrowed the term “conjunctures of debates” from Ananda Abeysekara’s groundbreaking work on religion and politics in contemporary Sri Lanka Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003). Indeed much of my thinking for this dissertation is inspired by and indebted to Abeysekara’s thought.
12 Ibid, 106-111.
These statements are obviously very problematic. Werbner is either unaware of or uninterested in the colonial legacy of descriptors such as “cultic practices surrounding saints’ tombs” that she so unreservedly employs. Her assessment is also factually incorrect since both Deobandī and Barelvī scholars were prominent jurists and Sufis. But what I want to emphasize however is the way in which this description of the Barelvī-Deobandī rivalry rests on the assumption that law and mysticism are two readily identifiable and distinguishable discursive domains “locked in continuous religious controversy.” While the trope of “reform” and hence the label of “reformer” is attached to scholars who “emphasize legal reasoning as against mysticism,” their antagonists are conveniently placed under the vacuous category of “saintly jurists.” This kind of a framing canonizes competing native discourses into readily available binaries like reformist/saintly, legal/mystical, prior to the contingent conjunctures in which those discourses authoritatively contest the boundaries of such categories.

Another illustration of this tendency is found in the work of the prominent French historian of South Asian Islam Marc Gaborieau. In his book Un Autre Islam: Inde, Pakistan, Bangladesh Gaborieau argued that the intellectual history of Islam in modern South Asia can be classified into two distinct and contrasting varieties of scholars. On the one hand, he proposed, were the “reformers.” In Gaborieau’s view, this reformist trend begins in the 1740s with the preeminent 18th century scholar Shāh Walī Allah (d.1762) and continues into the late 19th century and onwards in the form of modernist reformers like Chirāgh ‘Alī (d.1895), the pioneers of Deoband, and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars. On the other hand was an intellectual tradition populated by scholars whom Gaborieau labeled as the “non-reformers” or the “unreformed.” This non-reformist movement
originated with Wālī Allah’s son Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz (d.1823) and was carried forward in
the 19th century by scholars attached to the Barelvī school.\textsuperscript{13}

Apart from the unwieldy historicist gesture of lumping varied actors and discourses
across two centuries into such generalized categories, this unabashedly dichotomous
representation of South Asian Islam also imposes onto native traditions a prepackaged
definition of reform. As I will show in chapter 3, contrary to Gaborieau’s
characterization, Barelvī scholars also imagined their role as that of reformers entrusted
with the mission of preserving long running rituals and devotional practices. Their
antagonism with the pioneers of Deoband was not based on more or less of reform, but
on rival visions of what the work of reform entailed and demanded.

Similarly, in an important article entitled \textit{The Definition of Bid’a in the South Asian
Fatāwā Literature}, Khalid Mas’ud described the context of 19th century Indian Muslim
reform as characterized by a “revival in conservatism which grew continually and
reflected Muslim feeling of minority status against the Hindu majority.”\textsuperscript{14} He continued,
“This feeling created a polarization between Sufis and jurists in general. The Sufis were
more liberal to Hindus and folkways. They were sometimes also blamed for syncretism.
There were reform movements within Sufism which stressed \textit{sharī’a}.”\textsuperscript{15} Masud’s
description crystallizes an approach that views Islam as an object of analysis readily
available for division into such dichotomies as Sufi/jurist, liberal/conservative, and
\textit{sharī’a} centered/folksy. Moreover, this kind of a representation accepts without pause an
orientalist/colonial narrative that equates Sufism with syncretism, inclusiveness, and folk

\textsuperscript{13} Marc Gaborieau, \textit{Un Autre Islam: Inde, Pakistan, Bangladesh} (Paris, Albin Michel, 2007), 142.
\textsuperscript{14} Khalid Masud, “The Definition of Bid’a in the South Asian Fatāwā literature” \textit{Annales
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 59.
religion and law with exclusiveness, rigidity, and conservatism. A good deal of scholarship has now shown the poverty of this narrative.\(^{16}\)

Such a bipolar representation of South Asian Islam is found in even more stark and crass terms in David Pinault’s book on religion and popular culture in Pakistan *Notes from a Fortune Telling Parrot: Islam and the Struggle for Religious Pluralism in Pakistan*.\(^{17}\) The manner in which he contrasts Deobandīs and Barelvīs captures quite well public and scholarly perceptions about the texture of the Barelvī-Deobandī conflict. Pinault defines Deobandīs as “adherents of the puritan ideology that spawned the Taliban.”\(^{18}\) He goes on to inform us that “the term Barelvi is used to characterize those Sunnis who admit the orthodoxy of Sufi practices.”\(^{19}\) According to Pinault’s brief but telling descriptions, the Barelvī-Deobandī rivalry represents a tussle between anti-Sufi puritans who eventually “spawned the Taliban” and defenders of “the orthodoxy of Sufi practices.”

The conceptual assumption underpinning this narrative is that Islam represents a linear spectrum of views that ranges from puritanism to Sufism. Concomitantly, following this logic, ordinary Muslims and Muslim scholars can also be readily compartmentalized on either side of these dualistically opposed categories. One should add here that it is precisely such a bifurcated understanding of Islam that empowers recent neo-colonial attempts to frame Sufism as the “peaceful/apolitical” variety of Islam that stands in

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\(^{18}\) Ibid, 9.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 42.
opposition to more “violent/political” articulations of the religion. The central flaw in this kind of thinking (or lack thereof) is that it seeks to objectify and canonize life that is not available for objectification and canonization.

My point is this: interpreting the contested terrain of South Asian Islam (or any other discursive tradition for that matter) through the lens of binaries like reformer/non-reformer, revivalist/traditionalist, anti-Sufi/Sufi, and liberal/conservative obscures more than it reveals about the competing ideological claims that populate it. This dissertation rejects the utility of such binary constructions that are the products of Western scholarship on Islam. Instead, it argues for a conceptual approach that views rival narratives on the boundaries of religion as “competing rationalities of tradition and reform.”

The protagonists who articulate these rationalities seek to strategically control the limits of tradition. They strive to puncture the capacity of rival discourses to speak authoritatively about what should and should not count as religion. This operation involves mobilizing certain strategic practices of exclusion. For instance, such practices include demonstrating the logical incoherence of opposing arguments, showing their inconsistency with previous authoritative arguments, injuring the credibility of actors who articulate those rival arguments, and most importantly, offering alternative and contrasting programs of the normative.

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The contested terrain in which such opposing discursive strategies battle for supremacy is never available for division into disciplinary binaries. Instead, this terrain demands a practice of thinking (theory) that closely navigates the conflicting logics through which the parameters of a discursive tradition are fought out. It is precisely such a conceptual approach that this dissertation attempts to employ. By examining competing 19th century Indian Muslim rationalities of tradition and reform, it documents some ways in which the limits of Islam in colonial India were articulated, brought into central view, and battled out.

**Chapter Outline:**

The chapters in this dissertation are thematically rather than chronologically organized. Chapter 1, “Competing Political Theologies” discusses a polemical moment between Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrbādī, two prominent early 19th century thinkers in Delhi, over the limits of prophetic intercession in Islam. The theme of competing political theologies refers to the contrasting ways in which the relationship between divine sovereignty and prophetic authority is understood during junctures of political uncertainty such as India’s transition from Mughal to British colonialism in the early 19th century. What languages and imaginaries of the political inform theological debates on the question of divine sovereignty? How do the political and the theological overlap and cross-pollinate each other? What are the competing rationalities of tradition engendered by competing political theologies? These are the central conceptual questions that animate this chapter.
Chapter 2 “Law, Sovereignty, and the Boundaries of Normative Practice” explores a different yet connected theme. It investigates the discourses of the pioneers of the Deoband Madrasa on the limits of heretical innovation (bid‘a) in Islam. Heretical innovation refers to practices and modes of being that oppose the normative model of the Prophet. But what are those practices and how should that be determined are questions that provoke intense controversy and disagreement, as they did in 19th century Muslim India. This chapter elucidates major elements of the Deobandi ideology by highlighting ways in which its pioneers imagined and contested the limits of heretical innovation. Conceptually, it interrogates possible connections between a political theology invested in guarding the absoluteness of divine sovereignty and a legal imaginary anxious to control the boundaries of normative practice in everyday life. I show that according to Deobandi thought, the question of when innovation becomes heresy is one that operates at the interstices of law and theology. The crux of their reform project, much like that of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s before them (whom they avidly supported) was centered on the goal of reforming and reorganizing everyday life in a way that affirmed the radical exclusivity of divine sovereignty.

Even if otherwise commendable ritual practices, such the Prophet’s birthday celebration, threatened or undermined divine sovereignty, they had to be deemed heretical and abandoned. For Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers, the work of reform entailed an insurrection in prevailing habits, customs, and norms of sociability. They imagined their role as that of interventionists who intervened in history to change its course. Moreover, they authorized this interventionist model of reform by mobilizing a conception of time and history as marked by perpetual decline and disjuncture from an
original moment of perfection. This chapter elucidates these themes by primarily focusing on the major Deoband scholar Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī’s (d.1944) discourses on heretical innovation.

Chapter 3 “Retaining Goodness: Reform as the Preservation of Original Forms” provides a rival narrative of the boundaries of tradition and innovation in Islam. It discusses the founder of the Barelvī School, Aḥmad Razā Khān’s refutation of Deobandī views on heretical innovation. Khān chastised his Deoband rivals for what he saw as their unwarranted assault on long running rituals and devotional practices in the guise of confronting heretical innovations. Reform for Khān signified the retention of the normative goodness embodied in previously established practices in each successive present, rather than jettisoning them on the precautionary grounds of protecting divine sovereignty. He was especially scathing in his repudiation of any attempt to delegitimize rituals that served as a means of remembering and honoring the Prophet. For Khān and his Barelvī followers, questioning the cosmic centrality of the Prophet and downplaying the exceptionality of his spiritual status amounted to dismantling the entire edifice of tradition. In their misguided and uninformed zeal to restore divine sovereignty, that is precisely the kind of discursive sedition that the pioneers of Deoband were committing, Khān argued. This chapter elucidates the major features of that argument.

Chapter 4 “Knowing the Unknown: Contesting the Sovereign Gift of Knowledge” focuses on a conjuncture of polemical activity between Khān and his Deoband rivals on the question of the Prophet’s access to knowledge of the unknown (‘ilm al-ghayb). Despite all their other disagreements, it was in the context of this specific question that Khān had anathematized the Deoband pioneers and declared them unbelievers. This
chapter analyzes the opposing conceptions of the relationship between knowledge, sovereignty, and prophetic charisma that inspired Khān’s dramatic judgment. I argue that at stake in this debate over the nature and capacity of the Prophet’s knowledge was the very definition of knowledge and religion.

The question of whether the Prophet possessed knowledge of the unknown intimately depended on what counted as religious and salvationally beneficial knowledge. As a consequence, defining the limits of knowledge was inseparable from defining the limits of religion as an ideological category. The boundaries of what counted as knowledge and religion were mutually constituted, each reinforcing the other. Finally, in a brief conclusion, I discuss some of the larger theoretical implications and contributions of this dissertation in the fields of religion studies and South Asian studies.
Chapter 1

Competing Political Theologies

Sometime during the first decade of the 19th century, the prominent North Indian Muslim reformer Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl was teaching a lesson on Ḥadīth while seated in the courtyard of the famous Jāmiʿ mosque in Delhi. A crowd of people carrying relics of the Prophet (tabarrukāt) swarmed the mosque, chanting reverential hymns and prayers in praise of the Prophet. Ismāʿīl was unmoved by the spectacle and continued his lesson. His lack of response, however, did not please the people associated with the procession.

“Mawlānā, what kind of behavior is this?” one of them scolded Ismāʿīl. “Please stand up and show your reverence for the Prophet’s relics,” the man continued.1

Ismāʿīl, however, remained unfazed. His continued indifference incensed the crowd. They repeated their demand, this time in an even harsher tone. Ismāʿīl finally responded by saying, “First of all, these relics are artificial; they are not real. Secondly, at this moment, I am serving as a delegate of the Prophet by performing the obligation of transmitting his message. Therefore I cannot stand up.” This scornful response further agitated an already angry crowd. An all-out brawl was only prevented because Ismāʿīl’s loyalists at the mosque were as numerous as his detractors. Their skirmish was thus limited to a lively verbal duel and an exchange of verbal abuses.2

Severely offended by Ismāʿīl’s behavior, the procession holders lodged an official complaint against him to Akbar Shāh (d.1837), the Mughal Emperor in Delhi at the time. They accused Ismāʿīl of insulting the Prophet and requested Akbar Shāh to punish him

1 Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī, Arvāḥ-yi Salāsa (Lāhore: Islāmī Academy, 1976), 49.
2 Ibid, 49-50.
for his unruly attitude. The Emperor summoned Ismā‘īl to his court and demanded an explanation for his actions at the Jāmi‘ Mosque on the day of this incident. While at the court, Ismā‘īl admitted that he said the relics were artificial and that he was not inclined to venerate them. Akbar Shāh reproached Ismā‘īl, “how impertinent that you call them (the relics) artificial.” Ismā‘īl smiled and responded mildly, “Sir, I only used words to say they were artificial but you believe them to be so and also treat them as such.” Akbar Shāh replied in bemusement, “How so?” “Sir, every year,” Ismā‘īl explained, “the procession of relics comes to visit you in your court but you never leave your court to visit the relics.” This response left the Emperor speechless.

Ismā‘īl then requested a minister at the court to bring a copy of the Qur‘ān and the Hadīth collection of Bukhārī. When these two books were brought to him, he held them in his hands for a few moments and then returned them. He then proceeded to deliver a speech to those gathered at the court. In this speech, Ismā‘īl again emphasized that firstly it is debatable whether the relics were real or artificial. “But”, he continued, “even if we were to accept their authenticity, the sacrality associated with objects such as a piece of garment or sandals worn by the Prophet is not deserving of personal or substantive honor (sharaf-i zātī). On the other hand, there is no doubt about the Qur‘ān being the word of God. Similarly, Bukhārī’s book of Hadīth is undeniably the word of the Prophet which is the most revered book in the tradition after the Qur‘ān. There can be no doubt that the word of God and the word of the Prophet are more sacred than a garment once worn by the Prophet. But despite all this when a copy of the Qur‘ān and Bukhārī’s Hadīth came before you, none of you stood up in reverence! From this it becomes apparent that all of
you venerate the Prophet’s relics not because of their sanctity but merely because of your addiction to established customs \((rasam parastī)\).”

As shown in this narrative, by the early 19\(^{th}\) century, intra-Muslim contestations on the limits of tradition and prophetic authority became centrally visible in the North Indian public sphere. Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl, the protagonist of this story, personified an emerging reform movement that vigorously critiqued long established customs and conventions, calling them inessential if not outright harmful to religion. Venerating the Prophet’s relics, for instance, represented an unnecessary distraction that undermined the essentials of the religion. Moreover, these reformers avidly protested monarchical modes of life and politics that in their view encouraged a morally sluggish public. A politics of aristocracy, they argued, nourished a religious ethos that encouraged the entrenchment of superstitious customs in the public sphere and that undermined divine sovereignty. This sentiment of anti-aristocracy is clearly palpable in how the narrative above connects the “addiction” of the masses to entrenched customs with the moral ineptitude of the Mughal emporer at the time.

But as the visceral opposition against Ismā‘īl for his refusal to venerate the Prophet’s relics shows, the banner bearers of this reform movement met fierce resistance. A rival group of scholars vigorously challenged their authority and staunchly defended the traditions they had attacked. For them, practices like honoring the Prophet’s relics represented an ideal way to exalt and keep alive his memory. Therefore, anyone who challenged the normative validity of such rituals was guilty of detracting from the Prophet’s status and charisma.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.
These contestations over the normative limits of tradition and prophetic authority were authorized by a conjuncture in Indian Muslim history marked by a crisis of sovereignty. In the decades following the death of the last recognized Mughal emperor ʿĀlamgīr Aurangzeb in 1707, the political fortunes of the Indian Muslim elite plummeted. By 1757, after more than two hundred years of Mughal rule, a new imperial power had come to dominate the political landscape of the country, the British East India Company. Akbar Shāh, the Mughal Emperor mentioned in the story above, was only a titular monarch whose effective authority was limited to the capital city of Delhi. He was among a series of Aurangzeb’s descendants who “reigned” over an India in which the pendulum of sovereignty was gradually yet decisively shifting towards the British.4

These shifts in political sovereignty also provided the conditions for intensified contestations on the question of sovereignty in the theological realm. Underlying these contestations was the following central question: what imaginaries of the political should inform the conceptualization of the interaction between divine sovereignty, prophetic authority, and human agency? Was this tripartite relationship organized in the form of a hierarchy whereby accessing the sovereign divine was only possible through the mediatory charisma of the Prophet? Or was the divine-human encounter founded on a politics of radical democracy that resisted any notions of hierarchy? What imaginaries of everyday life and practices did these contrasting political theologies demand?

These were the kinds of questions that generated a number of polemics and debates among the Indian Muslim intellectual elite during this transitional political conjuncture. This chapter analyzes such a moment of polemical activity in 1826 that brought into view competing understandings of the relationship between divine sovereignty and prophetic charisma in Islam. The actors who participated in this polemic were two prominent Sunnī scholars in Delhi, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl (featured in the narrative above) and Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī. I will introduce these actors, the texture of their polemic, and the significance of their disagreements soon. At this point however, as a necessary prelude to that discussion, I want to highlight certain pivotal features of the broader political context in which this polemic between Ismā‘īl and Khayrābādī unfolded.

**Thinking the Question of Sovereignty in Early Colonial India**

In his influential book *Political Theology*, German theorist Carl Schmitt argued that the transition from conceptions of transcendence to those of immanence represents one of the key developments in European political theology from the early modern period. Through a radical “pushing aside” of the sovereign as the sole lawgiver of his kingdom, a democratic notion of legitimacy came to replace a previously monarchical one. The epoch of royalism came to an end because legitimacy no longer existed in the traditional sense. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Schmitt argued, were dominated by the idea of the sole sovereign in the domains of both theology and politics. Schmitt, in effect, claimed that the metaphysical image that a particular epoch forges of the world parallels the structure of its political organization. Therefore, as conceptions of immanence increasingly influenced the political ideas and the state doctrines of the 19th century they

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5 Carl Schmitt was a major theorist of political theology who lived from 1888-1985. He is most well-known for his proposition that the sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception.
undercut monarchical authority, which was eventually supplanted by an order of radical democracy.6

The decisive quality that distinguished this new consciousness of democracy from its older monarchical counterpart, Schmitt argued, was its complete intolerance for the state of exception, which in theological terms signifies miracles and dogmas that transcend human comprehension and critical doubt. As Schmitt put it, “Democracy is the expression of a political relativism that is liberated from miracles and dogma.”7

I find Schmitt’s theoretical move to be potentially useful insofar as it opens up the discursive space to ask the following question: how do changing imaginaries of political concepts and ideas fashion the way in which such seemingly theological concepts as divine sovereignty and the human-divine relationship are thought about and conceived in particular historical conjunctures? Interrogating the interplay of the political and the theological can prove especially fruitful in the context of what one might call hinge moments when an established political order is on the verge of dissipating and being replaced by another, such as periods of transition from monarchical to colonial power. This kind of a problem-space is particularly relevant to the case of South Asian Islam and its transition from Mughal rule to British colonialism, a gradual process of shifting power dynamics that took place between the 17th and the 19th centuries, roughly the same time period that occupied Schmitt’s study.

7 Ibid, p.43.
As historian Christopher Bayly had argued, the broader shifts and transformations in the informational and political networks of India that eventually enabled British colonial rule were well underway from the beginning of the 18th century onwards. According to Bayly, India’s transition from Mughal to British rule in the 18th and 19th centuries saw three major politico-economic developments; 1) the decentralization of political authority into smaller and more diffused networks of power, 2) the consolidation of a peasant class and a concomitant growth in the agricultural sector of the economy, and 3) an increased sophistication and mobility in both formal and informal networks of information sharing and intelligence gathering among various colonial and native agents. Furthermore, this last trend decisively diminished the political authority and cultural capital of the older imperial and aristocratic elite.\(^8\)

Historian and anthropologist of South Asia Bernard Cohn’s seminal work on the colonial construction of sovereignty provided fascinating insights into the cultural effects of India’s transition from Mughal to British colonialism. According to Cohn, during the early 19th century, the British continued the ritual idioms of their Mughal predecessors in establishing their political sovereignty over native Indian society. However, the meaning they attached to those idioms was radically different than before. The British appropriation of Mughal symbols represented an act of translation between two very different economies of imperial sovereignty. One of the most revealing theatres where such a process of translation took place was the *darbār* or the royal court.

Throughout Mughal history, the site of the royal court had served as a critical point of contact and exchange between the Mughal rulers and their subjects. More specifically, the ceremonial rituals conducted at the Mughal darbār served the function of incorporating native subjects into the larger imperial project. For instance, one such ritual that took place in the darbār was the offering of gifts and valuables such as gold coins, elephants, horses, and jewels by native elites to the Mughal emperor. This offering represented a gesture of their loyalty to the empire. Known as nazar (vow) or peshkash (offering), the value of these gifts was carefully calibrated according to the rank and status of the person who made the offering.

In return, the Mughal emperor would present that person with a khelat (Arabic Khil’a); a piece of garment or set of clothes that usually included a cloak, turban, and shawls. This process of exchange was suffused with symbolic significance; the khelat was a symbol “of the idea of continuity or succession…and that continuity rested on a physical basis, depending on contact of the body of recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of the clothing.”

In other words, far from a simply material exchange, the offering of nazar and the receipt of khelat “were acts of obedience, pledges of loyalty, and the acceptance of the superiority of the giver of the khelats.” Moreover, this ritualized demonstration of sovereignty and kingship also enabled the incorporation of particular segments of native society into the narrative structure of imperial rule. As Cohn elaborated, “the indigenous

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10 Ibid.
theory of rulership in India was based on ideas of incorporation, and a *theory of hierarchy* (emphasis mine) in which rulers not only outranked everyone but could also encompass those they ruled.”

However, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, although the British as the new ‘Indian rulers’ continued the practice of accepting *naẓar* and *peshkash* and of giving *kheldats*, the meaning they ascribed to this moment of exchange had transformed. In contrast to the Mughals, the British tended to approach these acts primarily in material terms. The offering of *naẓar* and *peshkash* were seen as paying for favors, which the British translated into rights related to their trading activities. They also “glossed the offering of *naẓar* as bribery and *peshkash* as tribute, following their own cultural codes, and assumed there was a direct *quid pro quo* involved.”

In the British inheritance of *darbār* rituals, a carefully choreographed performance of imperial sovereignty was translated as a materially driven instant of exchange. As Cohn explained, “Mughal ritual might seem to have been retained but the meanings had been changed. What had been, under Indian rulers, a ritual of incorporation now became a ritual marking subordination, with no mystical bonding between royal figure and the chosen friend and servant who was becoming part of the ruler.”

The most important point to underscore here is the subtle yet dramatic shift in the sociology of sovereignty precipitated by the emergence of British colonial rule in India. In the transition from Mughal to British rule, while the external forms of the imperial performance of sovereignty continued, the meanings contained in them had transformed.

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid, 169-70.
13 Ibid, 172.
This combination of continuity and transformation reflected a larger contradiction in the political rationality of British colonial rule in India during the early 19th century. While on the one hand seeking to maintain India as a feudal order, the British also looked to enact changes in native society that would inevitably dissolve this feudal order and give rise to a new ‘modern’ civic order.

This inherent tension in the logic of British colonial rule remained unresolved until the peasant uprising of 1857 that saw a brutal suppression of the rebellion and the eventual trial and imprisonment (in exile) of the last Mughal king, Bahādur Shāh Ẓafar (d.1862). After this watershed event, through the Government of India Act of 1858, the British firmly vested in their monarch the political sovereignty of India.

More importantly, the symbolic capital attached to the figure of the Mughal emperor was now entirely desacralized. The previously complex navigation of native mechanisms of legitimizing sovereign authority was now replaced by the brute demonstration of colonial power over its subjects. As Cohn summed up, “the trial of the emperor has to be seen in relation to the Government of India Act of 1858. The trial and the judicial exiling of the emperor and the end of Mughal rule was accomplished by completely desanctifying the previous political order of the society.”14

It is clear from Cohn’s analysis that the conceptual economy of sovereignty underwent a momentous transformation at the advent of colonialism in India. A previous notion of sovereignty tethered to considerations of privileges, hierarchies, and the importance of corporeal bonds with native society made way for a markedly materialistic understanding.

14 Ibid, 178.
of sovereign power. This moment of transition from Mughal kingship to British colonialism in India’s political history also intensified debates and contestations on the conceptual economy of sovereignty among religious scholars and communities. In South Asian Islam, a number of questions about the normative relationship between the divine sovereign and the human subject emerged as sites of tremendous intellectual fermentation and at times immense controversy. For instance, how was divine sovereignty to be imagined during a moment when political sovereignty was steadily disintegrating? How must Muslims perform their daily lives in a way that affirmed the absolute alterity of divine sovereignty? What did sovereignty depend on? Did divine sovereignty hinge on the capacity to enact the exception, such as miracles? If yes, then how was one to understand the Prophet’s capacity as an intercessor (on the Day of Judgment) when through his charisma sinners were granted the exception of a pardon? Who decided on the exception; was there any tension between divine and prophetic claims to exceptionality?

These were precisely the cluster of questions that inspired a fierce polemical exchange between Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl and Fazl-i Ḣaqq Khayrābādī.15 Their polemic centered on the normative limits of prophetic intercession (Shafāʿat) in Islam. Shafāʿat or intercession refers to Prophet Muḥammad’s role as an intercessor between God and human sinners on the Day of Judgment. By petitioning to God on behalf of sinners, the Prophet helps exonerate their sins and hence enables their place in heaven. The Prophet’s

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15 To reiterate, the polemical encounter considered in this essay occurred sometime in 1826, a moment in Indian history when British colonial rule had already taken hold but had not yet completely overridden the Mughal Empire that it replaced; that development takes place later in 1857. Thus in many ways, this time-period can be characterized as one of gradual but definite transition from Mughal to British colonial rule.
capacity for intercession is well documented in traditional sources of normative authority in Islam, such as the Qur’ān and the Prophet’s sayings. However, the scope of that capacity and its implications for divine sovereignty has remained subject to intense contestation. For instance, in pre-modern Islam, scholars attached to the Mu‘tazalī school of theology rejected the doctrine of intercession. The Mu‘tazilites found intercession an immediate threat to divine sovereignty.

In more recent times, proponents of the Wahhābī school of thought in Arabia have attacked the doctrine of prophetic intercession with much fervor. The most dramatic example of such an attack came in 1925 when the Saudi authorities destroyed the tombs of the Prophet’s family and his closest companions, on grounds that the masses had turned these tombs into sites of active worship, thus undermining divine sovereignty. The polemic between Ismā‘īl and Khayrabādī described in this chapter occurred exactly a century before the Saudi decimation of the Prophet’s family’s tombs. In many ways then, their polemic represents the beginnings of an ideological conflict that turned into a full blown hurricane of debates and polemics in the following decades, often resulting in very material consequences, such as the destruction of tombs and shrines. Ismā‘īl’s rivalry against Khayrabadi pitted against each other two opposite imaginaries of divine sovereignty and its relationship to prophetic charisma. The outcome of this encounter was dramatic.

Khayrabādī charged Ismā‘īl of anathema/unbelief (kufr) for insulting the Prophet and declared him an unbeliever who deserved to be killed. Ismā‘īl, in turn, accused Khayrabādī of perpetuating a moral order that decimated the exceptionality of divine sovereignty and that encouraged the perpetuation of heresies and corruptions among the
masses. Their hostility metastasized into a monstrous ideological battle among rival North Indian Muslim scholars in the latter half of the 19th century, as discussed in the next three chapters. But despite Ismā‘īl’s and Khayrābādī’s pivotal contribution to the narrative of Indian Muslim reform, their thought has not received any sustained attention in the Euro-American academy. This chapter seeks to partially redress that situation.

By examining Ismā‘īl’s and Khayrābādī’s competing views on the question of prophetic intercession, I wish to explore the competing political theologies that anchored those views. Following Jan Assmann, by political theology, I mean the “ever-changing relationships between political community and religious order, in short, between power [or authority: Herrschaft] and salvation [Heil].”16 In this chapter, I describe two rival narratives of the political ethos that sustains the normative relationship between the human subject and the divine sovereign in Islam. I will argue that at stake in Ismā‘īl’s and Khayrābādī’s ostensibly theological debate was the larger political question of how should one understand the concept of sovereignty under conditions of political change and transition. This chapter then is about the interplay, the overlapping, of theological and political imaginaries. The overarching theme I wish to explore concerns ways in which Muslim theological discourses articulate and are informed by contrasting understandings of the political.

Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl: A Memory Suspended Between Competing Narrative Contracts

There are very few thinkers in the theater of South Asian Islam whose intellectual legacy is as controversial, contested, and polarizing as that of Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl (also known as Shāh Ismāʿīl Shahid). Born in 1779 in Delhi, Ismāʿīl came from a family of some of the most distinguished and influential Muslim scholars in modern India. His grandfather was the famous and much heralded 18th century scholar Shāh Walī Allah. Ismāʿīl’s father was one of Walī Allah’s lesser known sons, Shāh ‘Abdul Ghanī. Ismāʿīl received his religious education including training in Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, jurisprudence, logic, and moral philosophy primarily under the tutelage of his illustrious uncles Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz and Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn (d.1821).

But despite Ismāʿīl’s intellectual bonds with his family, it was the charismatic figure Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī17 (d.1831) who most profoundly impacted his reformist career. Barelvī was more a military warrior than a scholar, though he had studied the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth from Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz, with whom he was closely associated. Barelvī met Ismāʿīl in 1819 after returning to Delhi from the princely state of Tonk (presently Rājasthān). He was sent there by ‘Azīz to receive extensive military training from the then Nawāb of Tonk Amīr ‘Alī Khān (d.1834). Ismāʿīl’s encounter with Barelvī was a turning point in the former’s life.

17 Not to be confused with the late 19th century ideological formation “Barelvīs” led by Aḥmad Razā Khān.
Prior to this moment, despite his intellectual promise, Ismāʿīl had failed to develop any coherent agenda of reform. Generally lacking discipline, he had also refrained from taking up a stable profession. As the native historian/biographer and one of Ismāʿīl’s most ardent supporters Ghulām Rasūl Mehr put it, “there was an element of carelessness (be-parwāī) in his temperament.”

But after meeting Barelvī and pledging to him his allegiance, Ismāʿīl experienced a conversion of sorts. His previous indifference and indiscipline made way to a rigorous program of religious reform. A gifted orator, Ismāʿīl began delivering the Friday sermons at the centrally located Jāmiʿ Mosque in Delhi. He attracted massive crowds every week. These sermons primarily focused on the themes of restoring divine sovereignty and abandoning heretical customs and traditions, themes that later dominated his intellectual career.

In addition to delivering formal sermons, Ismāʿīl also preached feverishly at public spaces such as markets and streets. Much to the chagrin of his family members, he even took his message of reform to famous brothels in Delhi, reminding dancing girls and their patrons of the “divine calamities” that awaited them. For instance, one night after offering his evening prayers at the Jāmiʿ Mosque, Ismāʿīl ventured to the brothel of a famous prostitute in Delhi called Motī (Hindī for pearl.) This brothel was frequented by some of the most affluent elite of the city. After pretending that he was a beggar seeking charity, Ismāʿīl was let in to the brothel. Upon entering the brothel, he spread a piece of cloth on the courtyard, sat on it, and loudly recited Sūrat al-Tawba (chapter of repentance) from the Qurʿān (until the verse that reads “thereafter we reduce him to the

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lowest of the low, *thumma radadnāhu asfal-sāfilīn.*) He then proceeded to deliver a fiery speech that painted a vivid image of torture on the Day of Judgment.

Gripped with severe remorse and emotional panic, Moṭī and her elite patrons began smashing the drums and other musical instruments at the brothel. They also instantly repented. That same night when Ismā‘īl returned to Jāmi‘ Mosque, he was stopped at the staircase by his first cousin and the famous scholar of Ḥadīth, Muḥammad Ya‘qūb Dīhlavī. Dīhlavī confronted Ismā‘īl and reproached him for visiting a brothel. He said, “Your grandfather and your uncle were esteemed figures. You come from a family that kings have venerated for generations. But you are severely injuring your reputation. Bringing such dishonor upon your self is not wise.” Ismā‘īl responded assuredly, “Mawlānā, I am bewildered at what you have just said. You consider what I did tonight a form of dishonor. Well this was only the beginning. I will consider myself venerated the day when the people of Delhi will mount me on a donkey, blacken my face, and take me around Chandnī Chawk\(^\text{19}\) while I will be saying to them “God said such and such and God’s Prophet said such and such (*Qāla Allah Kadhā wa Qāla Rasūl Allah Kadhā*).\(^\text{20}\)

One of the signature reformist campaigns in which Ismā‘īl most earnestly participated was that of widow remarriage. Because of the social taboo associated with widow remarriage in certain Hindu traditions, this issue was of considerable interest for Muslim reformers eager to cleanse Indian Islam of Hindu influences. The subject of widow remarriage was personal to Ismā‘īl. His older sister was a widow who had not remarried

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\(^{19}\) Chandnī Chowk is one of the oldest and busiest markets in Old Delhi which exists today in North Central Delhi. It was originally built in the 17th century by the Mughal Emporer Shāh Jahān (d.1666) and designed by his daughter Jahānārā (d.1681).

\(^{20}\) Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī, *Arvāḥ-yi Salāsa* (Lāhore: Islāmī Academy, 1976),
for several years. By his own later admission, Ismāʿīl said he too had absorbed and internalized the taboo attached to widow remarriage in North India at that time. As he recounted, “While teaching my sister the Ḥadīth collection of Mishkāt [by Muḥammad al-Tabrīzī (d.1340)], I used to intentionally leave out prophetic reports about the virtues of widow remarriage. I was fearful that she might desire to remarry.” This apprehensive attitude transformed after Ismāʿīl took Barelvī as his spiritual guru. According to Ismāʿīl, it was Barelvī who opened his eyes to the “fact” that the taboo against widow remarriage “was a Hindu custom that opposed the prophetic norm.” Thereafter, Ismāʿīl got his sister remarried to one of his close friends. The story behind her remarriage is worth narrating.

One day, Ismāʿīl was preaching on the subject of widow remarriage at the Jāmiʿ Mosque. A man sitting in the audience raised his hand, gesturing that he had a question to ask. Ismāʿīl immediately intuited that this man was going to ask him about his widowed sister, who was still unmarried. He became very nervous, and took the preemptive measure of calling the gathering off immediately, telling his audience, “I need to go take care of something very important, let’s meet next week.” Ismāʿīl hurried out of the mosque and went running to his older sister’s house. As soon as she opened the door, he fell on her knees, and said, crying hysterically, “Oh sister, my career is in your hands, the efficacy of my sermons depends on you.” Taken by complete surprise, she replied, “What are you talking about?” Ismāʿīl explained, “If you get married, you will help me resuscitate an important prophetic norm, and allow me to continue giving my sermons with authority.” She tried to reason with her brother, “My dear brother, as much as I would like to revive a prophetic norm, I am just too old and sick to get remarried.” When

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21 Ibid, 71.
Ismā‘īl continued to insist, she finally succumbed and agreed to her brother’s plea. She was married off to one of his close friends.22

Soon thereafter, buoyed by this personal victory, Ismā‘īl launched a full-scale movement to get widowed Muslim women in North India remarried. He was joined by an army of his associates who went village to village searching for widowed Muslim women eligible for remarriage. In fact, a certain Maulvī ‘Abdul Rahīm was so zealous to find widows in order to get them remarried that he became famous as “the widow remarriage Mullah” (Rāndon ke shadī walay Mullah).23

Barelvī’s influence on Ismā‘īl’s reformist awakening is unquestionable, even though the latter was a more accomplished and learned scholar. In a particularly poignant moment, Ismā‘īl was once asked by someone: “your uncles Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz and Shāh ‘Abdul Qādir love you passionately and Sayyid Aḥmad Sāḥib is among their disciples. Why is it then that you are so much closer to Sayyid Aḥmad than you are to your own uncles?” Ismā‘īl responded tersely, “All I will say is that when I used to teach my (widowed) sister the Ḥadīth collection of mishkāt, I used to intentionally leave out prophetic reports about the virtues of widow remarriage, fearful that she might desire to remarry. But after my association with Sayyid Aḥmad blossomed, I myself took the lead in getting her remarried. From this you can discern why I am so close to him.”24

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22 We are not told whether or how this friend gave his consent to marry Ismā‘īl’s sister.
In addition to his evangelical activities, Ismā‘īl also wrote some of the most important religious texts in early 19th century Muslim India. His writings encompass a remarkable range of themes and disciplines including law, theology, logic, politics, and mysticism. But despite his multivalent intellectual output, any thinking about the figure of Ismā‘īl today cannot escape the thicket of polemical activity that surrounds his memory. In this context, the bitter rivalry between the pioneers of the reformist groups Deobandīs and Barelvīs in the latter half of the 19th century has strongly contributed to his divisive persona, as many of their polemics were centered on some of Ismā‘īl’s most controversial statements.

Indeed, Ismā‘īl’s specter continues to haunt the polemical landscape of intra-Sunnī rivalries in Muslim South Asia (and indeed in many places outside of South Asia) in profound ways even today. His supporters as well as his detractors are equally enthusiastic in their opinions about him. Both during his own life and later, Ismā‘īl’s supporters, most notably the pioneers of the Deoband, saw him as a champion awakener who had intervened in a situation of utter moral chaos in Muslim India. For them, Ismā‘īl’s role was akin to a savior who had reenergized the commitment of the masses and the scholarly elite alike to the primacy of divine sovereignty as a covenant of Islam.

25 Apart from his most well-known and fiercely controversial text Taqviyyat al-Īmān-The Fortification of Faith on divine sovereignty, some of Ismā‘īl’s other prominent texts include ‘abaqūt which is a commentary on Wali Allah’s mystical work lama’āt (on the 13th century Muslim Andalusian Arab Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi’s doctrine of ontological monism, wahdat al-wujūd), mansāb-i imāmat, a tract on political theology that argued for a political system of republicanism grounded in the sharī‘a, and īzāḥ al-hagg, an exposition on the legal rules and hermeneutical principles relevant to the concept of heretical innovation (bid‘a) in Islam.

26 In addition to the founders of Deoband, some of Ismā‘īl’s most ardent supporters included the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and the prominent 20th century scholar Abu’l Hasan ‘Alī Nadvī (d.1999). Nadvī translated Taqviyyat al-Īmān into Arabic and played an important role in popularizing this text in the Arab Middle East.
However, for his opponents, Ismā‘īl was a person of questionable intellect who through his provocations against the Prophet and other revered figures of the tradition had been the first to plant the seeds of intra-Sunnī divisions in India. As the prominent contemporary Barelvī scholar Yāsīn Akhtar Mişbāhī put it, “Under Ismā‘īl’s standards of what constitutes normative Islam, the vast majority of Muslims from the last 500 years of Indian history will have to be declared unbelievers. Before the publication of Taqviyyat al-Īmān [one of Ismā‘īl’s most controversial texts] there used to be only two groups of Muslims in India, Sunnīs and Shī‘as. Now, because of his insidious agenda, the Sunnī community of India has been divided into countless sects and factions.”

Ismā‘īl’s foes charged him of insulting the normative authority of the Prophet and of denigrating the sanctity of venerated traditions and devotional practices. In the deeply polemical environment of late colonial India and also today, Ismā‘īl is often labeled by his opponents as the first “Indian Wahhābī.” Moreover, his opponents also sought to uncouple Ismā‘īl from the legacy of his illustrious grandfather Shāh Walī Allah by caricaturing him as the black-sheep of the Walī Allah family who was not even deserving of being called a scholar.

For example, notice the disdainful sarcasm with which one contemporary Barelvī polemicist Sayyid Muḥammad Na‘īmuddīn described Ismā‘īl’s character as a student during the latter’s youth:

27 Quoted in Sayyid Muḥammad Na‘īmuddīn, Atyab al-Bayān fī Radd Taqviyyat al-Īmān (Bombay: Razā Academy, 1998), 206.
28 Ismā‘īl has also been accused of plagiarizing his work in Taqviyyat al-Īmān from the 18th century Arab reformer Muḥammad Ibn al-Wahhāb’s (d.1792) well-known book kitāb al-tawḥīd. However, that claim has not been substantiated. I am not aware of any evidence that explicitly connects Ismā‘īl to Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s followers or thought.
Shāh Ismā‘īl was the bane of his teachers’ existence. Always negligent with his homework, he would disrupt classes and cause havoc for other students with his obnoxious and unruly behavior. His only passions were kite flying (patang bāzī), physical exercise (jismānī warzish) and wasting his time. Arrogant and self-boasting, Shāh Ismā‘īl was a perpetual source of embarrassment for the elders of his family, such as his renowned uncle Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz. How unfortunate that the Deobandi ‘ulamā’ have taken this least competent member of the Walī Allah clan as their religious guide while paying little heed to the thought of its other exalted luminaries.29

The hyperbole of the above description aside, Ismā‘īl’s reformist activities later in life do seem to have generated a fair degree of consternation for the esteemed Ḥanafī scholars of his family. For instance, contrary to the Ḥanafī traditions of Muslim India, Ismā‘īl preached and followed the practice of raising both hands (raf‘al-yadayn) during prayers. This practice was a subject of intense contestation between Ḥanafī and non-conformist (ghayr muqallidīn) scholars of India. When Ismā‘īl’s uncle Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz was informed about his nephew’s endorsement of this practice and about the controversy that it was generating, he shrugged in resignation, “I am an old man now. He will not listen to what I say.”30 Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz requested his younger brother Shāh ‘Abdul Qādir to pacify Ismā‘īl and to dissuade him from igniting unnecessary scandals. Qādir responded, “Sir, I will do as you say. But he will not listen to me either. Instead, he will volley me with prophetic reports.”31 However, instead of letting the matter evaporate, Shāh ‘Abdul Qādir charged his own son and Ismā‘īl’s cousin Muḥammad Ya‘qūb Dihlavī (also mentioned earlier) for this task.

29 Sayyid Muḥammad Na‘īmuddīn, Atyab al-Bayān fī Radd Taqviyyat al-Īmān (Bombay: Razā Academy, 1998), 38.
31 Ibid, 75.
Yaʿqūb talked to Ismāʿīl and advised him against engaging in provocative practices like *rafʿ al-yadayn*. Ismāʿīl responded just as his younger uncle had predicted, by firing a prophetic report. He said to Yaʿqūb, “Considering the moral chaos (*fitna*) that has afflicted the masses these days, how are we to understand the prophetic report “whoever adheres to my practice in times of corruption will be rewarded with the reward of a hundred martyrs.” Ismāʿīl continued, “Of course, when someone revives an abandoned prophetic practice (*sunnat-i matrūka*), there is bound to be controversy.” When Shāh ‘Abdul Qādir was told about Ismāʿīl’s response, he sighed, and said despondently, “we had thought Ismāʿīl has become a scholar. But he cannot even understand the meaning of a *Ḥadīth*. This principle only applies when an established prophetic practice is being opposed by a non-prophetic practice. But in this case, both the raising of hands and letting them suspended are among the Prophet’s practices. So in this context, the comparison is not between a prophetic norm and an opposing counter-norm, but between two different articulations of the same normative practice.”

Apart from the controversy surrounding his intellectual life, Ismāʿīl ’s legacy and memory have also been heavily influenced by his central role in the North Indian *jihād* movement against the Sikhs during the years 1826-31 in what is today the Khyber-Pakhtūnkhwah Province (formerly North West Frontier Province) in Pakistan. Under the charismatic leadership of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī, Ismāʿīl and a few hundred other scholars and laypeople had waged war against the Sikhs to liberate the Pashtūn Muslims of that region from what they perceived as the tyranny of Sikh rule. The political goal of this movement was the establishment of a *Sharīʿa* governed republic under a Muslim

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
ruler. After some initial success that saw the retreat of Sikhs from the region, and the anointment of Sayyid Aḥmad as the leader (imām) of the community, the local Pashtūn support for this movement sharply dwindled and eventually turned into outright opposition. The implementation of laws like the institution of one-tenth land tax (‘ushr) and a ban against high dowry rates played a critical part in this reversal of relations.

For the North Indian reformers, these measures brought them closer to realizing the utopic mission of fashioning a society that replicated divine law. But for the local Pashtūns, such restrictions opposed established tribal norms and disrupted the order of life to which they were accustomed. This underlying philosophical rift on how law and society should interact resulted in irreparable adversary, to the extent that Pashtūn tribal leaders realigned with the Sikhs as they launched an all out campaign to oust Barelvī and his followers from the region. The outcome was political and military catastrophe.

Almost all the North Indian reformers save a few were killed at the hands of Sikhs and Pashtūns. Ismā’īl, along with Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī, was also killed during this campaign in December 1831, in the town of Bālākot.

Like most other aspects of his life, this final event that ended it has also become a subject of contested interpretations, fuelled by ideological differences and post-colonial nationalist narratives. For some, the North Indian jihād movement against the Sikhs was a necessary moment of religious reform that had only gone awry because of the betrayal of the local Pashtūn tribes and their leaders who had turned against their own “liberators.”

Further, according to this view, despite their military failure, the “martyrs of Balākot” had paved the way for all future attempts to establish an Islamic state in South Asia. As the famous 20th century Indian-Pakistani Islamist and founder of the Jamāʿat-i Islāmī

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34 For an excellent demonstration of such a depiction, see S.M Ikrām’s Mauj-i Kausar.
Sayyid Abu’l Ā’lā al-Mawdūdí (d.1979) once wrote, “In the twelve-hundred year history of Islam in South Asia, only the campaign led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelvī and Shāh Ismā‘īl Shahīd can be called jiḥād in the true sense of the word. While previous Muslim rulers in South Asia fought several wars, none of them was divinely inspired; these were mere wars, not jiḥād in God’s path. It is these two men who set aside all personal and political ambitions and waged war to enforce God’s law on God’s earth.”

When told by Ismā‘īl’s opponents such as the Barelvīs, however, this same event turns into a completely different narrative. According to this narrative, in their unbridled zeal for political power, Ismā‘īl and his compatriots had set the unfortunate precedent of causing bloodshed and chaos in a community populated by other Muslims. Further, had they genuinely desired the liberation of Muslims from non-Muslim rule, rather than traveling hundreds of miles to take on the Sikhs, they would have instead focused their energies on removing the more menacing threat of British colonialism within Northern India. In fact, so this story goes, the architects of this jiḥād movement were British agents charged with the task of dividing South Asian Muslims along ideological and sectarian lines.

Such an accusatory narrative does not entertain the possibility that for Ismā‘īl, the Sikhs were simply a more immediate threat to South Asian Muslims than were the British. The expectation that he should have held the British in greater contempt than the Sikhs says more about the ideological desires of a nationalist anti-colonial politics than
about the actors (in this case Ismā‘īl) on whom that desire is projected. Even today, Ismā‘īl’s proponents and opponents continue to mobilize his memory for ideological projects that he would not have recognized. His memory remains suspended between competing ideological narratives.

“Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl,” as this name is inserted into different narrative contracts overtime, becomes marked by such descriptors as “an inspiration for Deobandī thought,” “the first genuine martyr in South Asian Islam” (as Mawdūdī would have it,) “the first “Indian Wahhābī,” and so forth. While some of these descriptors are laudatory and others condemnatory, what they have in common is the narrative desire to separate from the turbulence of history a congealed understanding of Ismā‘īl’s legacy.

In the discussion that follows, I am not interested in finding a historicist resolution to that legacy or in providing a yet another narrative of how it should be understood. Indeed, given the density of polemically charged representations attached to the figure of Ismā‘īl, it is impossible to historically resolve the controversy he continues to inspire. Instead, it will be more fruitful to examine his discourses in a way that clarifies his own social imaginary and also destabilizes all varieties of absolute claims on his memory. A critical discursive site that demands such an approach is his views on the theme of divine sovereignty, to which I now turn.

**Restoring Divine Sovereignty:**

Arguably the most defining feature of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s intellectual career was his desire to reenergize the primacy of divine sovereignty in the religious imagination of Indian Muslims. Ismā‘īl was of the opinion that the religious lives of
Muslīms in India had become so heavily dominated by the authority of prophets, saints, mystics, and other charismatic personalities that they had almost forgotten the ultimate power of the divine. As he once exclaimed:

These people think that no matter what we do in this world, some powerful saint or Prophet will always intercede on our behalf and rescue us from the wrath of God. This kind of an attitude is completely foolish and wrong. There is no source of mercy and redemption in the afterlife except the providential authority of God. These masses who forget God (emphasis mine) in their unfettered reliance on saints, martyrs, and legends are thoroughly misguided.\textsuperscript{37}

Although this sentiment is found in several of Ismā‘īl’s works, it was most forcefully articulated in one of his shortest yet most controversial books, \textit{Taqviyyat al-Īmān (The Fortification of Faith)} originally composed in Urdū and published in 1826, on the eve of the \textit{jihād} campaign against the Sikhs. This book continues to spark heated debates and polemics until today. In the nearly 185 years since its original publication in 1826, more than 250 refutations of this book have been written.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Taqviyyat al-Īmān} was one of the first Urdu publications composed in the genre of a primer intended for a mass public audience rather than a specialist class of expert scholars. It was published during a moment in Indian Muslim history when Urdū was gradually yet decisively replacing Persian as the lingua franca of the religious and the literary elite.


\textsuperscript{38} For more on the role of the newly emerging printing presses in Northern India in the production and dissemination of \textit{Taqviyyat al-Īmān} and other such reformist texts, see Harlon Pearson, \textit{Islamic Reform and Revival in 19th Century India: The Tariqa-yi Muhamadiyya} (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008).
The organizational structure of *Taqviyyat al-Īmān* comports with its intended popular audience. All sections of the book begin with a Qur’ānic verse or a prophetic report in Arabic, followed by a translation in Urdū and Ismā‘īl’s commentary on the selected verse/report. In his introduction to *Taqviyyat al-Īmān*, Ismā‘īl announced that he deliberately wrote this book in vernacular Urdū so that the commoners are able to comprehend its content with ease. Moreover, he urged his readers to reject the notion that they were in any need of specialist scholars for accessing religious sources of knowledge such as the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. As Ismā‘īl put, “There is a pervasive myth among the masses that understanding the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth is difficult and that such a task requires a great deal of knowledge. They wonder how can ignorant folk like us understand these specialized sources of knowledge and act according to them. Such an attitude is completely unfounded because God declared in the Qur’ān “We have bestowed upon you clear messages; no one denies their truth except the iniquitous.”

In *Taqviyyat al-Īmān*, Ismā‘īl authorized his argument for restoring divine sovereignty by telling a particular story of moral fallen-ness in the present he inhabited, a present in which according to him several competitors to the sovereign authority of the divine were flourishing in the public sphere. According to this story, the vast majority of Indian Muslims, both among the masses and the elite, were drowning in the sea of polytheism and unbelief.

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As he wrote:

These masses have turned saints, prophets, pious figures, angels, and fairies into their Gods. They supplicate before these entities for their needs, pray to them, offer food in their name, and name their own children after them. So today we find someone with the name ‘Abdul al-Nabī (the Prophet’s slave), someone else called ‘Alī Bakhsh (‘Alī’s gift), or Ḥusayn Bakhsh (Ḥusayn’s gift), Ghulām Muḥiyuddīn (the slave of the resuscitator of religion), and Ghulām Muʿīnudīn (servant of the one who orders religion).40

It is not as if people no longer believed in the absolute sovereignty of God or were declared atheists, Ismāʿīl argued. Rather, God’s sovereignty was being undermined by the entrenchment of certain beliefs, habits, and conventions in the everyday lives of the masses that were based solely on saintly or ancestral authority and that lacked a precedent in the normative model of the Prophet. A heresy (bidʿa) for Ismāʿīl constituted any belief, habit, or form of knowledge that either explicitly or implicitly challenged God’s sovereignty as an omnipotent and omniscient entity.

Ismāʿīl’s litany of heresies in this context are too numerous and extensive to be listed here, but some illustrative examples include believing that any of the prophets or saints possess knowledge of the unknown (‘ilm al-ghayb), seeking the help of a saint to conceive a child, specifying certain animals as sacred or taboo without any normative justification, organizing and taking part in the birth anniversaries of the Prophet and saints with the belief that they personally appear at such gatherings to bestow their blessings, seeking the intercession of saints in times of need and distress, engaging in “secular” activities like playing chess and attending poetry reading assemblies with a discipline and regularity that simulated obligatory acts of religion such as praying and

40 Ibid.
fasting, holding the belief that a dead saint can harm or benefit living people, among several others.

Ismāʿīl’s social imaginary was anchored in an attitude of constant rivalry between human and divine norms. In his view, these humanly innovated habits and conventions had assumed the form of a counter-religion in the public sphere, what one might call a faux religion that simulated a divinely ordained order of normativity, but that was in fact nothing more than a conglomeration of repugnant heretical innovations. Ismāʿīl defined a heretical innovation as any habit or convention that despite not being divinely authorized as religion was nonetheless adhered to with an intensity and passion that simulated religious practices.

This extension of the non-religious into the domain of religion was heretical because it disturbed God’s sovereignty as the exclusive decider of what does and does not count as religion. Therefore, law and theology, belief and practice, were inseparable in Ismāʿīl’s thought. As he put it, “heresy in its essence hinges on attitudes of belief (‘aqīda); believing that a practice is beneficial when God has not called it beneficial and believing that a practice is harmful when God has not deemed it harmful; that is the definition of a pure heresy (bid’a ḥaqīqiyya).”

Therefore, for Ismāʿīl, belief was not an internalized matter of rigid convictions; it constituted a dynamic object of knowledge. Belief and knowledge were inseparably intertwined; to know an act as harmful was to believe it to be so. You believe what you know was the maxim that guided Ismāʿīl’s thinking. Moreover, heresy represented the

41 Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl, Īzāḥ al-Ḥaqq (Qādīmī Kutub Khāna), 73.
condition in which a divinely ordained program of correspondence between knowledge and belief was interrupted by the human act of choosing how that correspondence unfolded. Heresy, therefore, signified the act of choosing (haeresis); choosing on the basis of one’s own will an order of normativity that was not divinely sanctioned and as a result opposing the sovereignty of the divine as the sole author of law and its limits. In order to align this matrix of knowledge, belief, and practice to a divinely sanctioned template of normativity, it was vital, Ismā‘īl argued, to cultivate a subject and in turn a public that were decisively intolerant towards any patterns of thought and activity that might cast any doubt on the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty.42

The Locations of Sovereignty:

But what were those signs of servitude that God had specified as exclusive for His being? What were those privileged sites of thought and practice that validated divine sovereignty and that were hence unavailable for any non-divine entity? In responding to this central question, Ismā‘īl advanced four types of transgression, each of which corresponded with particular privileges reserved exclusively for the divine and therefore unavailable for any other entity. These types of transgression were: transgression in knowledge, transgression in the capacity to enact miraculous exceptions, transgression in devotional practices, and transgression in everyday habits and practices. Very briefly, transgression in knowledge included all those practices and attitudes that undermined God’s omniscience. For example, to constantly chant a saint’s name, to call out his name with the belief that he is listening, or to think that all human conditions such as illness,

destitution, life, and death are known to certain figures gifted with miraculous capacities. In short, transgression in knowledge represented the moment of associating kinds of knowledge exclusive to the divine with non-divine entities.\textsuperscript{43}

Similarly, transgression in the capacity to enact exceptions referred to such capacities as giving and taking life at will, fulfilling supplications, thwarting evil, curing illnesses, afflicting with illness, and so on. These were all privileged capacities that established divine sovereignty and were therefore unavailable for any other entity. Transgression in devotional practices centered on simulating those bodily gestures, movements, and activities that God had specified as signs of devotion for his being. For example, prostrating, kneeling, standing with tied hands, giving charity in God’s name, fasting, traveling long distances for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, going on pilgrimage in a physical state that clearly distinguished the pilgrims from all other people, refraining from useless chatter and hunting around the site of pilgrimage, circumambulating around the \textit{Ka’ba}, covering it with a blanket, kissing the black stone, refraining from cutting trees, plucking grass or grazing animals around that area, and so on; these were all practices that had been designated as demonstrators of God’s sovereignty.

The simulation of these specificities in other moments of devotional activities, such as when visiting shrines of venerated saints, represented heresy. In other words, transgression in devotional practices referred to the act of simulating the mental, physical, and spatial geographies of performance that in Ismā‘īl’s view were specific to the

\textsuperscript{43}Interestingly, Ismā‘īl also argued that the association of such privileged forms of knowledge with non-divine entities represented heresy regardless of whether those knowledges were considered essential (\textit{dhātī}) to that entity or as gifted to them by God (\textit{‘aṭā‘ī}). The question of knowledge and its relationship to sovereignty is discussed more extensively in chapter 4.
affirmation of divine sovereignty. As he put it, “God has specified all these activities for his own devotion. Now if someone were to prostrate or kneel before the tomb of a saint or prophet, fast in his name, travel long distances to venerate him, hoist a flag in his name, light candles at that venue, venerate the forest and plantations in the neighboring areas, or cover the walls of the tomb with blankets; all of these activities constitute transgression in devotion meaning venerating a non-divine entity as if it were divine (ghayr Allah kī ta’żīm Allah kī sī karnā).”

Finally, transgression in everyday habits and practices was the most expansive of the four categories. It was also the category that most clearly connected Ismā‘īl’s theology to his larger critique of aristocratic modes of organizing life. For instance, the excessive veneration of other people in everyday discourse, referring to other people with such reverential epithets as “the highest excellency” (janāb-i ā’lā) or “his majesty” (qibla), taking pride in one’s ancestral lineage (iftikhār bil ansāb) by boasting one’s affiliation with noble lineages such as Pathan, Rajput, and Mughal, kissing the hands of pious figures or elders as a show of respect etc. Transgression in everyday habits and practices, in short, represented the condition of allowing a non-divine entity the same intensity of veneration in everyday life that was exclusively reserved for the divine. Each of these forms of transgression, Ismā‘īl claimed, was thriving among Indian Muslims.

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44 Ibid, 61.
**Tradition as the Repetition of Origin:**

According to Ismāʿīl’s reformist narrative, the drama of early Islam pitting Prophet Muḥammad and his fledgling community against hostile pagans, Jews, and Christians in 7th century Arabia was being repeated in his own 19th century Indian present. While the actors had changed, the narrative plot was the same. The message and path of normativity, defined by submission to an absolutely sovereign divine, was being opposed by heretics of various stripes who thoughtlessly followed the practices and pathways of their ancestors. Moreover, Ismāʿīl argued, much like Islam’s antagonists during the Prophet’s career, Muslims in 19th century India were also completely unaware of the malaise of heresy that encrusted their lives. While most people claimed to be believers, they were in fact stuck in the quagmire of unbelief. In the pretext of venerating saints and prophets, such people only disseminated the poison of heresy, without even being cognizant of their sins. Ismāʿīl described this condition vividly:

> When someone confronts these people and warns them against mixing the opposite paths of belief and unbelief, they confidently reply, “You cannot charge us of unbelief because all we are doing is showing our love for prophets and saints. Moreover, you could only accuse us of polytheism if we considered these entities as equal to God. But we regard them as God’s creation who are divinely bestowed with certain miraculous capacities. They are God’s beloveds. To call them for help is to call God. To find them is to find God. The closer we get to them, the greater our proximity to God.”

Ismāʿīl’s rebuttal of this argument provides us with instructive clues about the way he imagined tradition and its relationship to time. He claimed that this kind of a justification was identical to the line of reasoning advanced by unbelievers during the early years of Islam. Even during Muḥammad’s prophetic career, he argued, it is not as if the

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unbelievers regarded their idols equal to God but only as his creation. Moreover, they also recognized that these entities do not possess divine capacities. However, Ismā‘īl continued, their challenge to divine sovereignty consisted precisely in such practices as making vows on the name of idols, petitioning them for forgiveness, and so on; practices that God had designated as markers of his own sovereignty. It is for this reason, he claimed, that in the following Qur’ānic verse God had chastised Jews and Christians for venerating their saints and prophets, even though they did not worship idols: “They take their priests and their anchorites to be their lords in derogation of Allah, and (they take as their Lord) Christ the son of Mary; yet they were commanded to worship but One Allah. There is no god but Him. Praise and glory to Him: (Far is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).”

Conceptually, Ismā‘īl argued, there was no difference between the Indian Muslim masses of his era who venerated saints and prophets in ways that undermined divine sovereignty and the unbelievers during the formative years of Islam. Both were guilty of a common sin: associating privileged sites of divine sovereignty with non-divine entities. Similarly, Ismā‘īl further argued, the tendency among Indian Muslims to undermine the Prophet's humanity by excessively venerating him was identical to the way Christians had divinized Jesus. According to Isma‘il, the Prophet had himself warned his community against simulating Christians in this regard when he had said "don't excessively exalt me like the Christians exalted Jesus son of Mary. I am but God's slave. So call me God's slave and God's messenger."

On another occasion, the Prophet had cautioned his followers “Don’t elevate me above the status [of a human] that God has assigned to me. I am Muḥammad, son of ‘Abdallah, and God’s slave and His messenger.” For Ismā‘īl, these prophetic admonitions were meant to establish a non-negotiable boundary between divine reality (ḥaqīqat-i ulūhiyya) and Muhammadan reality (ḥaqīqat-i muḥamadiyya), a boundary that Indian Muslims routinely transgressed in the guise of showing their love for the Prophet. This excess replicated the way Christians ascribed divine qualities to Jesus or how Meccan pagans had turned their idols into divine figures. In other words, in Ismā‘īl’s view, despite the temporal distance between these two moments, Islam in early 19th century India and the Prophet’s career in 7th century Arabia shared a common moral and aesthetic space. This space was defined by a preponderant and imminent threat to the exceptionality of divine sovereignty. Moreover, after the Prophet, it was the task of prophetic reformers like Ismā‘īl to battle this threat by expending their evangelical energies in undermining any real or potential competitors to the divine sovereign.

Ismā‘īl’s move of narratively connecting prophetic time to his own moment of reform is quite revealing of how he approached the interplay of tradition and temporality. For Ismā‘īl, as shown in his comparison between Indian Muslim masses with Jews and Christians in early Islam, the narrative drama of prophetic time was now being repeated in colonial India. Critical to this conception of tradition as the repetition of an origin is the role of translation. By arguing for the perfect translatability of these two temporal moments, Ismā‘īl attempted to cast the story of the antagonism between tradition and heresy as an ongoing repetition of an origin. Reforming the present, in Ismā‘īl’s imaginary, rested on the promise of inheriting a tradition from the past that seamlessly
traveled through time; that was always perfectly translatable as an object of inheritance. Moreover, the distinction between past and present was effectively dissolved by grounding it in the figure of an immutable divine sovereign. The absolute stability of divine transcendence eviscerated the dynamicity of time. Rather than an evolving project of contested meanings, tradition represented the repetition of an eternal origin. That origin was indistinguishable from the totalizing figure of a sovereign divine.

An illuminating contrast to this notion of tradition as a process of timelessly conserving the past is the way Walter Benjamin understood this term. According to Benjamin, “tradition itself is something that is thoroughly alive and extraordinarily changeable” 47 such that “the idea of discontinuity is the foundation of genuine tradition.” 48 Tradition, he argued, “is never a secure inheritance but a process of ceaseless contestation. When it projects itself as a secure transmission, this can have catastrophic consequences.” 49 Indeed, catastrophic consequences are exactly what met Ismā‘īl’s eventual fate.

In thinking further about the idea of reform as the inheritance of a perfectly translatable past, Jacques Derrida’s reflections on the theological underpinnings of the very idea of translation are thought provoking. 50 In one of his lesser known essays, “The Theology of Translation,” Derrida argued that “all the modifications of bilden [form, formation, figure, co(n)-figuration, schematization, etc.], are inseparable from what one could call

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48 Ibid, 1242.
49 Ibid.
50 I am indebted to Arvind Mandair’s work “Religion and the Specter of the West” for this reading of Derrida.
precisely the imperative of translation.”

There is, Derrida further suggested, an “ontotheological dimension, a problematic of ontotheology that is located at the founding of a certain concept of translation.”

This ontotheological dimension was intimately connected to what Derrida called “the art of generalized translation;” the idea that there exists an “originary unity” of the imagination that is shared by all languages and temporalities.

The aporia or the irresolvable contradiction of such a notion of generalized translation is that by presuming an originary unity of all imagination, it is already a disavowal of translation as such. As Derrida put it, “the concept of fundamental translatability is linked poetically to a natural language and resists translation.”

Ismā‘īl’s project of reform (like many other such projects?) was also entangled in the aporetic logic of seeking the repetition of an originary prophetic moment even though that moment was no longer available for repetition, of attempting to fashion a present that mimetically replicated a perfectly translatable past.

Ismāʿīl dismissed the idea of modifying the limits of tradition according to changes in temporality and accompanying shifts in the aesthetic sensibilities of subjects. Such modifications were not required since prophetic time and the present were perfectly translatable. Ismāʿīl most strikingly affirmed this sentiment of perfect translatability when he wrote, “Children were born then too, women used to menstruate, kids were circumcised, people used to get married, suffer from illnesses, die, graves used to be

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52 Ibid, 78.
53 Ibid, 80.
54 Ibid, 69.
constructed—so one must always ask, what did the Prophet do in these situations, and how were these practices of everyday life undertaken by his succeeding Companions.”

For Ismā‘īl, tradition represented an oracle from the past that was always available for replication in the present. Such a projection of tradition as mimetic-praxis accords with Derrida’s suggestion that, “The ideal and the real are not separable in the unity of originary knowledge. *This unity permits one to speak, without trope, of the one as of the other, of the one in the language of the other* (emphasis mine).”

**Can God Create a Million New Muḥammads?**

The most controversial aspect of Ismā‘īl’s theology was the absolute terms in which he argued for the radical alterity of divine sovereignty. In relation to the sovereign divine, he claimed, all other entities whether prophets, jinns, Satan, spirits, fairies, or saints, were equally radically inferior. As he had thundered: “Oh people! Beware of this all sovereign and proud king whose power is unlimited and beyond comprehension. His pride is of utmost importance (to him); how could he exonerate or not punish an unbeliever?.....Even if all human beings and jinns from the time of Adam to the end of time become like archangel Gabriel and Muḥammad, the splendor of his kingdom will not rise, and if they all become like Satan and the anti-Christ, that splendor will not diminish. In all conditions he is the most sovereign of all sovereigns and the king of all kings; no one can harm or benefit him.”

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57 Ibid, 66.
In an even more dramatic affirmation of the divine capacity to enact the exception, in what has since proven to be the most controversial moment in this text, Ismā‘īl had also declared, “God is so powerful that in one moment, just by uttering the command Be, he can create millions of new prophets, saints, jinns, angels, Gabriels, and Muḥammads.”

On another occasion (and in another text called *yak roza,* Ismā‘īl had also contended that God possessed the capacity to contravene his own promises. So for instance, while God had promised to send Pharaoh, Abū Lahb, and Hāmān to hell, he may well undo that promise by sending them to heaven. Ismā‘īl framed his argument by drawing on the distinction between potentiality (*imkān*) and actuality (*wuqū‘*). He argued that although God has the capacity to create a million new Muḥammads or to contravene his own promise, he will never actually do so.

In other words, the divine potentiality to enact the exception never passes over into actuality; it instead maintains itself in suspension; in relation of a “sovereign ban” with itself whereby the potentiality to do something is also the potentiality not to do something. As the theorist Giorgio Agamben memorably wrote in his now classic Homo Sacer, “If potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear

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58 Ismā‘īl, 43.
59 Ismā‘īl wrote *Yak Roza* (one day), a short epistle in Persian, in response to Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī’s refutation of *Tuqviyyat al-Īmān.* Ismā‘īl is said to have written *Yak Roza* in just one day, hence the title.
60 The debate provoked by this claim is known until today as *imkān-i kizb* (God’s capacity to lie). However, this term is somewhat misleading because to be precise Ismā‘īl had not argued for God’s capacity to lie but rather to undo his own promise (*imkān-i khalf-i wa‘īd*).
immediately into actuality, it is necessary that potentiality constitutively be the potentiality not to (do or be).”  

He continued, “An act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.” The sovereign, Agamben further argued, is that zone of indistinction where pure potentiality and actuality are indistinguishable. The proposition “God may well create a million new Muḥammads” is situated precisely in that zone of indistinction.

In his zeal for restoring the primacy of divine sovereignty, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl would have found a lot in common with the thought of the 11th century Italian Christian reformer Peter Damiani (d.1072). Much like Ismā‘īl, Damiani was also a vigorous polemicist who was deeply invested in the question of divine sovereignty, as the title of his most influential work *De Divina Omnipotentia* (The Divine Omnipotence) clearly suggests. In this text, Damiani went after a range of Christian thinkers before him, most notably the prominent Thomistic scholar St. Jerome (d.420), who had argued for the boundedness (*protestas ordinata*) of divine power in a way that precluded God from undoing what he had already done. For instance, taking the example of virginity, he had claimed that “although God can do all things, he cannot raise up a virgin after she had fallen.”

63 Ibid, 46.
64 Ibid, 47.
66 Ibid.
St. Jerome was very uncomfortable with the idea of a capricious divine who may do as he wished. In his attempt to introduce some degree of order to divine sovereignty, he had carved a distinction between “absolute power” that established God’s radical alterity from any other being, and “ordained power” that referred to what he actually did. While absolute power was unrestricted, ordained power was regulated by a certain notion of divine reason that was reliable, orderly, and therefore accessible to humanity.

But Damiani, who followed St. Jerome seven centuries later, found such philosophical maneuvering a case of limiting something that was inherently unlimited. Responding directly to St. Jerome, he wrote, “How..dare we doubt that God can restore the virginity of a fallen woman? For God can undo the past-that is, so act that an actual historical event should not have occurred.”67 Notice the uncanny resemblance to Ismā‘īl’s declaration that “God may well create a million new Muḥammads” in the following pronouncement by Damiani: “God has no need of any creature and is judged by no necessity to create, out of that nothing into existence draws this natural world of ours..imposing upon it its customary laws. Incapable in his omnipotence and in his eternal present of suffering any diminution or alteration of his creature power, that natural order he could well replace, those laws at any moment change (emphasis mine).”68 In other words, according to Damiani, God’s claim to absolute sovereignty rested on His capacity to enact the exception of undoing what had already been done, of replacing the past within a moment’s notice. Ismā‘īl’s theology, much like Damiani’s,

68 Ibid, 44.
was informed by precisely such an understanding of sovereignty that hinged on the absolute capacity of the sovereign to enact the exception.

**The Deferred Promise of Salvational Democracy: Shah Muhammad Ismā‘īl on Prophetic Intercession:**

In continuing my interrogation of Ismā‘īl’s political theology, I now turn to one of the most controversial arenas of this thought; his discourse on the limits of prophetic intercession. The subject of intercession is inextricable to the question of sovereignty. The capacity to pardon a sinner signifies the ability to enact an exception, a departure from the normal rule. The sovereign, remember, at least according to the Schmittian notion, is he who enacts the exception. The role of an intercessor in this process can cause some tension. To be sure, an intercessor only serves as a petitioner who mediates between a sinner and the sovereign decision maker. But what is one to make of an intercessor whose petitions are never refused; whose status allows him to have all his requests for an exception approved? Does that in any way compromise the sovereignty of the sovereign?

These questions were central to Ismā‘īl’s discussion on intercession. He was most troubled by the tendency of the masses to associate sovereign powers with human intercessors such as pious saints and prophets. The way they understood the idea of intercession, he contended, confused the exceptionality of divine sovereignty with the intercessory authority of non-divine entities. He saw intercession as one of the principal arenas that threatened the radical alterity of divine sovereignty. In the discussion that follows, analyzing the coherence of Ismā‘īl’s argument according to traditional Islamic theology is not among my concerns. Rather, what primarily interests me is the language
in which he delivered his argument. What kinds of symbols, metaphors, and images populated his thought? What political posture might we discern from this seemingly theological discussion? What does his style of argumentation reveal about his social imaginary? These are some of the questions I will address.

Ismā‘īl’s discourse on intercession, consistent with his larger argument in Taqviyyat al-Īmān, sought to radically undercut the authority of intermediaries and non-divine entities, including the Prophet, in the realm of salvation and redemption. To describe in Schmittian terms, Ismā‘īl argued that it was only God who possessed the sovereign power to grant the exception of forgiveness and salvation to a sinner who would otherwise, according to the normal rule, be destined for hell. In formulating his argument, Ismā‘īl presented a number of prophetic reports in which the Prophet himself emphasized his fallibility and vulnerability as a human being. For example, in one such report that he quoted the Prophet said “I will be extremely angry with anyone who seeks my intercession. Such a person deserves to be completely shunned and repudiated because he compromises God’s legislative sovereignty.”

The Prophet, Ismā‘īl argued, was acutely concerned that his followers not divinize him with superhuman qualities and thus undermine God’s absolute sovereignty. Moreover, Ismā‘īl also argued that the aura and majesty of the Prophet was enabled not by any extraordinary capacities in the realm of salvation, but by the perfection of his humanity, by the paradigmatic example of his unwavering submission to divine sovereignty. In cementing this argument, Ismā‘īl adduced an array of verses from the Qur’ān in which

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69 Ibid, 58.
God instructs the Prophet to declare his incapacity to harm or benefit his community in the afterlife.

For example, “Say: It is not in my power to cause you harm or to bring you to right conduct. Say: No one can deliver me from Allah (If I were to disobey him), nor should I find refuge except in him.”70 In his commentary on this verse, Ismā‘īl exhorted his readers to take note of the Prophet’s keenness to establish his servitude for the divine in order to prevent his community from transgressing the limits of his own authority. Ismā‘īl wrote that the Prophet’s position, as reflected in this verse, can be summarized as follows: “Do not transgress the limits by thinking that our intermediary is extremely majestic and our intercessor very beloved (hamārā wakīl zabardast aur hamārā shafī‘ maḥbūb) so that we can do whatever we want and he will save us from God’s punishment. Even I (the Prophet) tremble before God and do not seek anyone else as my refuge.”71 Ismā‘īl continued, “From this verse it becomes apparent what misguided transgressors these Indian Muslim masses are who forget the sovereignty of the divine in their reliance on saints and holy figures. The master of prophethood (sarkār-i risālat) himself used to fear God day and night and find solace in nothing other than his mercy. Then who are these commoners to be following a different path.”72

Ismā‘īl also propounded a number of other verses that emphatically underscore the absoluteness of divine sovereignty and that are critical of the role of intermediaries and associates in the salvific realm. For example, these included, “They serve, besides Allah, things that hurt them not nor profit them, and they say: "These are our intercessors with

70 Qur‘ān 72:21-22.
71 Ismā‘īl, 95.
72 Ibid, 96.
Allah.” Say: "Do you indeed inform Allah of something He knows not, in the heavens or on earth? Glory to Him! And far is He above the partners they ascribe (to Him)!"73 Also, "Who is it in whose hands is the governance of all things, who protects (all), but is not protected (of any)? (Answer) if you can."74

At the same time that Ismāʿīl vigorously advanced his argument for limiting the scope of prophetic intercession, he was also faced with the unavoidable conundrum that contrary to his theological project, traditional sources of Muslim normativity, including the Qurʿān, contain several references that in fact affirm a normative role for human intercessors in the domain of salvation. For instance, “On that day shall no intercession avail except of him whom the Beneficent Allah allows and whose word He is pleased with”75 and “intercession will not avail aught with Him save of him whom He permits”76, are some among several other such verses in the Qurʿān that have historically been regarded as substantiating the doctrine of prophetic intercession. Confronted with this obvious obstacle, Ismāʿīl was presented with the challenge of devising a narrative paradigm, a hermeneutical strategy, that would provide him with purchase on his argument for the exclusivity of absolute divine sovereignty while also honoring the normative permission offered to non-divine intercessors in traditional Islamic sources.

How did he go about this task? What kind of a strategy did he employ in attempting to shift the parameters of normativity in relation to the question of intercession? In the discussion that follows, I will present a brief account of the way in which Ismāʿīl

73 Qurʿān 10:18.
76 Ibid 34:23.
performed this hermeneutical operation as a way of examining the larger political program that inspired his theology.

**Varieties of Intercession:**

In *Taqviyyat al-Īmān*, Ismāʿīl advanced a tripartite typology of intercession. The three types of intercession according to him are intercession based on high esteem (*shafāʿat-i wajāhat*), intercession based on love (*shafāʿat-i muḥabbat*) and intercession based on permission (*shafāʿat bil idhn*). Intercession based on high esteem refers to a situation in which an official from a king’s entourage possesses tremendous esteem in his court. This official is thus granted the capacity to intercede on behalf of a criminal. When the official petitions for a criminal’s exoneration, the king invariably accepts it. The king is fearful that he must not upset or insult such an important member of his kingdom or else his authority will be injured. Thus, keeping in mind the best interests of his government, he pardons the criminal and absolves him of his sins.77

Intercession based on love followed a very similar programmatic. This type of intercession involves a situation where someone whom the king loves a great deal petitions on behalf of a criminal. For example, such a person could be a close relative or a friend for whom the king holds deep affection. The king accepts this petition thinking that by hurting his lover he would hurt himself. Ismāʿīl argued that these two types of intercession are not found in God’s court; they can only operate in worldly monarchies. Moreover, it is only the third variety of intercession, intercession by permission, that is even conceivable in God’s kingdom.

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77 Ismāʿīl, 43.
According to Ismā‘īl, intercession by permission involves a situation in which a criminal has already repented for his crime and has vowed to never commit it again. Moreover, he is not a habitual criminal but had just once succumbed to his desires and transgressed. He is extremely ashamed and regretful of his actions, pregnant with the fear of punishment day and night, he keeps his head bowed down in guilt and sorrow. Such a criminal does not go around looking for a courtier or a minister to intercede on his behalf. Rather, agreeing that he deserves to be punished, he awaits the king’s verdict, in a state of severe angst and perplexity. The king feels pity for the miseries of the criminal and wants to pardon him. But he hesitates from following through on his inclination. The king reasons that were he to forgive a criminal in this manner, the other subjects of his kingdom might make light of the severity and authority of his justice system.

In this moment, a courtier or minister from the king’s court comes forward and petitions on behalf of the criminal. Importantly, the motivation behind this petition is not to help the criminal but to add weight to the king’s original leaning towards pardoning the criminal. The king accepts the minister’s petition and in the guise of honoring an esteemed member of his court, he goes on to exonerate the criminal. Ismā‘īl insisted that when the Qur’ān talks about the capacity of certain prophets to act as intercessors, it is this third type of intercession that is intended.

Most important to note here is that even in this third scenario, although the king only exonerates the criminal after receiving a petition from an exalted minister in his court, the decisive factor that went into his decision was that the criminal had already repented and had resolved to never commit a crime again. The petition of an intercessor only facilitated the process; it did not in itself represent the main cause for the criminal’s
exoneration. The cause of the criminal’s emancipation was solely the sovereign authority of the divine, not that of any other entity. Ismāʿīl’s insistence on emphasizing the “already repentant” character of the criminal is significant here.

Even while allowing for the legitimacy of some form of intercession, the accent of Ismāʿīl’s discourse was not on the capacity of an intercessor to mediate on behalf of criminals. To the contrary, he argued that a minister, (and by analogy, the Prophet Muḥammad), only intercedes on someone’s behalf when the sovereign king (and by analogy God), has already arrived at the decision to exonerate him. As Ismāʿīl wrote:

The only reason ministers intercede for such a criminal is that he has already repented for his crimes and the king has decided to forgive him. Ministers do not act as intercessors for the benefit of the criminal. Rather, their intercessory labor is solely invested in establishing their servitude towards the king. They (ministers) are not supporters (ḥiṣāyatī) of criminals; they are obedient subjects (farmānbardār) of the king.78

In a sense, the thrust of Ismāʿīl’s argument was somewhat counter-intuitive: intercession is only legitimate when it is not sought after, and when it plays only a marginal role in the eventual exoneration of the criminal. One might object then, as Ismāʿīl’s opponents later did, what is one to make of the authority of an intercessor whose intercession is unwanted and peripheral to the redemption of a sinner. Ismāʿīl did not address these ambiguities in any detail. However, what must be underscored here is the larger political program encoded into his theological discourse on intercession.

78 Ibid, 44.
The Cross-Pollination of Political and Theological Imaginaries:

The promise of egalitarianism found in Ismā‘īl’s theological imagination was intimately connected to a larger critique of worldly monarchies and royal kingdoms that in his view privileged a hierarchical order of human political authority. Ismā‘īl’s theological project was inseparable from his political goal of exposing the aristocratic hubris that in his view poisoned the Mughal moral economy in the waning years of that empire. A political theology of radical sovereignty required a moral economy of simplicity that jettisoned monarchical modes of being.

The rhythms of everyday life had to be orchestrated in such a manner that all habits, customs, and norms of socialization that threatened to undermine the sovereignty of the divine were abolished. For Ismā‘īl, the exclusivity of divine power was constantly undermined in a community that flocked to saints for assistance in moments of distress, and in which a culture of aristocracy and privileged nobility thrived in the public sphere. This situation of moral and political malaise could only have been corrected by establishing God as radically and absolutely different from and sovereign over all His creation.

In trying to achieve this task, Ismā‘īl sought to establish a decisive difference between secular and divine modalities of sovereign power. Particularly telling in this regard is the way he contrasted the vatic capaciousness of the divine with the pretentious aloofness and arrogance that characterizes worldly monarchs. As he explained, “God is not an elitist like worldly kings who dispense their mercy and generosity in a bureaucratic and selective fashion. Access to God’s court does not require any petitions or endorsements
from viziers, princes, or people of nobility. Even though God is the king of all kings (sab bādshāhon kā bādshāh), he is not arrogant like secular kings who pay no heed to the supplications of their subjects.”

Ismāʿīl argued that in the realm of divine justice one does not need to go through a chain of bureaucrats and intermediaries to have one’s supplications heard and answered. Moreover, it is not as if God only makes Himself available for only the major and most critical supplications of His subjects while delegating all minor affairs to His ministers. Unlike secular monarchs, while dealing with his subjects, God does not take part in any delegation. Citing a well-known prophetic report, Ismāʿīl claimed that one should not hesitate from asking God for even a shoelace when it breaks (ḥatā yasʿalahu shishʿ naʿlihi idhā inqaṭa’). In short, Ismāʿīl argued that since God’s generosity and mercy are endless and immediately available to the human subject, seeking the intercession of saints and prophets is unnecessary, illogical, and illegitimate.

Ismāʿīl elucidated his argument with a vivid analogy:

“Imagine a person was sitting with a king all by himself and he enjoyed that king’s complete and undivided attention. If, despite this intimate private company, this person were to cry out for some governor, minister, or vizier’s help who is far away and distant, the only conclusion one can draw is that either this person is blind or that he has lost his mind.”

This analogy is quite illustrative of the way Ismāʿīl approached the relationship between divine sovereignty and human agency. In his view, human agency was secured

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79 Ibid, 56.
80 Ibid, 60.
through submission to the absolute sovereignty of the divine. By affirming God’s absolute otherness, one attained God’s absolute proximity.

Equally significant as Ismā‘īl’s argument here is the rationally driven discourse in which he framed that argument. Calling an intercessor for help is not only illegitimate and heretical, it signifies that a person has “lost his mind,” has become irrational and blind because of his overweening dependence on non-divine sources of authority in the domain of salvation. Having received the providential gift of intimate proximity with the divine, seeking the intercessory services of a distant non divine entity was nothing but outright buffoonery.

Ismā‘īl further argued that seeking the immediate intercession of someone other than God equates to appropriating the divine’s privilege as the sole dispenser of mercy and handing it to another entity undeserving of that stature. Here again, the language in which Ismā‘īl articulated this sentiment is very revealing. In a style of argumentation that combined polemical abrasiveness and pedagogical remonstration, Ismā‘īl wrote, “handing the creator’s privilege of divine sovereignty to someone among His creation is like stealing the privilege of the most exalted and giving it to the most repugnant, it is like taking off a king’s crown and placing it on the head of a low caste Hindu. Can there by anything more unjust?!?”

He continued, “And one should know with all certitude that regardless of whether a human being is of a higher or lower status, compared to the majesty of God, his status is
lower than that of the lowest caste-Hindu (*chamār*).”

This statement is pregnant with irony. After all, the construction of a moral order that transcended hierarchies of caste and lineage was at the heart of Ismā‘īl’s reform project. But as demonstrated in his mobilization of the racially charged symbol of the *chamār*, Ismā‘īl’s social imaginary was not always consistent with his intellectual ideals.

**Sovereignty and the Imperative of Ontotheology:**

In theorizing the overlapping of theological and political imaginaries in Ismā‘īl’s thought it is helpful to return to Carl Schmitt’s proposition that the sovereign is he who has the ability to enact the state of exception, the capacity to suspend the application of the normal rule in the domain of law. As I have argued, central to Ismā‘īl’s theory of intercession was a complete deflation of all non-divine forms of authority in the realm of salvation; protecting the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty necessitated that the authority of all saints and prophets must be restricted to the fullest extent possible. In other words, it is only God who can break all the rules he made Himself. Or who in Schmittian terms possessed the power to enforce the state of exception, to suspend the rule by granting the miraculous exception of a pardon to a habitual criminal.

But an important question that emerges here is this: what kind of a subject was articulated and imagined in Ismā‘īl’s discourse? More specifically, in what ways was Ismā‘īl’s theology of divine transcendence connected to a desire for the constitution of a sovereign subject in the public sphere? How did his argument for the absolute alterity of divine sovereignty also construct a particular conception of popular sovereignty? Critical

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Ibid, 72. The word *chamār* refers to a low-caste Hindu who is also from a socially underprivileged background. Until today, it continues to be a derogatory term, primarily but not exclusively in Northern India.
to addressing these questions is the larger question of what we mean by the category of transcendence.

In his *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Martin Heidegger observed that “transcendence” with its signification of passing beyond limits can be understood in two different ways\(^{82}\): 1) the transcendent in contradistinction to the immanent and 2) the transcendent in contradistinction to the contingent.\(^{83}\) In the first modality, which Heidegger called “epistemological transcendence,” the transcendent is “that which does not remain within but is without, what lies outside the soul and consciousness…what is outside the borders and encompassing wall of consciousness.”\(^{84}\)

In this conception of transcendence, the key relationality is that between the interior and the exterior; the immanent being the interior, what remains within the soul/subject and the transcendent what lies outside the soul and consciousness. On the other hand, when set in opposition to contingency, transcendence assumes a theological conception as beyond all that pertains to us, touches us; as “stepping-over” in the sense of “lying beyond all conditioned beings..as the entirely unattainable.”\(^{85}\) “Being beyond in this case expresses the infinite difference between the creator and the created.”\(^{86}\) Heidegger further argued that in almost all forms of theological metaphysics, these two conceptions of epistemological and theological transcendence are conjoined so that “the problem of the existence of the external world is implicated in the problem of the knowledge of God

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\(^{84}\) Ibid.

\(^{85}\) Ibid,161.

\(^{86}\) Ibid,162.
and the possibility of proving God’s existence.” This kind of a framework in which a subject’s possibility of knowing the external world is bound up with his knowledge of a transcendent divine is what Heidegger called “ontotheology.”

The critical point to remember is that an ontotheological argument for transcendence constructs a figure of a divine sovereign that reproduces itself in the figure of a sovereign subject. Divine sovereignty and popular sovereignty are mutually constructed, each reinforcing the other. Ismā‘īl’s discourse on intercession was also sustained by a similar ontotheological apparatus. His argument for the exceptionality of divine sovereignty was as much about the constitution of a sovereign subject in the public sphere as it was about God. The figure of the divine and the figure of Indian Muslim identity were not independent. They were mutually co-figured in the discursive space of Ismā‘īl’s statements on divine sovereignty.

In *Taqviyyat al-Īmān*, Ismā‘īl propounded a political theology that cognitively bounded the performance of an Indian Muslim identity in the public sphere with the demand for that identity to affirm the transcendence of an immutable sovereign God. From within this ontotheological framework, the relationship of a subject to himself and to others pivoted on his fidelity to the sovereignty of the divine. Each individual in a community shared a collective responsibility to affirm divine sovereignty. The affirmation of divine sovereignty represented the basis of solidarity in a community. All members of a community were allied in their shared allegiance to the divine sovereign. However, that solidarity was maintained at the price of constant anxiety over transgressing the limits of divine sovereignty. Every thought, practice, and rhythm of everyday life required constant

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87 Ibid.
regulation such that all potential rivals to the sovereign divine were denied any access to the domain of sovereignty.

In such an environment of heightened vigilance and anxiety, ontology (being) was always bound to theology. The limits of life and the limits of identity were inextricably tied to the figure of a divine sovereign. According to this logic of identity, all forms of thought and practice that might threaten or undermine the cultivation of such a subject had to be eliminated. Ismā‘īl’s litany of transgressions that in his view opposed divine sovereignty was animated precisely by this ontotheological logic. In his view, these transgressions undermined a divine-human relationship whereby all moments of human life were captivated by the duty of affirming the absoluteness of divine sovereignty.

Moreover, in Ismā‘īl’s theological imaginary, the sovereignty of the self was secured through the promise of immediate access to the sovereign divine. A subject was empowered with freedom through the act of handing over all power to God. There was no need for any intermediaries such as prophets and saints to mediate between God and His human subjects. God was immanently available to His subjects to hear and answer their requests and supplications. In effect, God’s absolute sovereignty relieved the individual subject, and in turn, the collective public, of any dependence on non-divine sources of authority. Individual and collective salvation solely depended on allegiance to the sovereign divine. But, and this is the critical point, that salvation was conditional.

It was only available to someone who consciously and actively shunned all potential competitors to divine sovereignty. Someone who through his actions or convictions bolstered the authority of rivals to the sovereign divine was denied the gift of salvation.
Such a person who undermined the absolute alterity of divine sovereignty was guilty of committing theological treason. Maintaining the integrity of divine sovereignty required absolute allegiance to the sovereign divine during all moments of a community’s life. For divine sovereignty to have any coherence, it had to be absolute. This way of imagining divine sovereignty bears a striking resemblance to how the modern state authorizes its sovereignty over its citizens.

Much like the modern state that demands from its citizens absolute allegiance to its sovereignty, in Ismā‘īl’s political theology, God’s sovereignty could only be secured if it were absolute and immune from any threat of competition. And just as challenging the state’s sovereignty results in the loss of citizenship and makes one vulnerable to the charge of treason, for Ismā‘īl, challenging divine sovereignty made one an outsider to the faith. In other words, the limits of Indian Muslim identity, individually and collectively, were ontologically engraved to a theology of divine transcendence. This ontotheological arrangement was marked by a profound contradiction.

On the hand, Ismā‘īl articulated a theology of radical democracy. According to this theology, in handing all power to God, a community kept that power away from all human and non-divine entities. In return for its fidelity to the exclusive sovereignty of God, such a community was gifted God’s absolute proximity. But in order to achieve God’s absolute proximity, a subject was required to affirm God’s absolute otherness. God was at once both within and outside the community.

He was within the community as its most accessible member. However, He was also outside it as the sole sovereign who at any moment could enact the exception and alter all
existing rules. The moment of enacting the exception required God to step outside the bounds of the community to suspend the rules and laws that He had put in place. In effect, in relation to His subjects, God was at once absolutely proximate and absolutely distant. He was radically immanent yet radically transcendent. God was everywhere. And yet He was nowhere.

No notion of sovereignty, be it associated with the religious divine (God) or with the secular divine (the state), can escape this irresolvable contradiction. Ismā‘īl’s political theology was also entangled in the contradictory logic of securing divine sovereignty through the curation of a public that was obligated to unceasingly affirm and guard that sovereignty. This was an impossible task.

Ismā‘īl’s controversial views on prophetic intercession and his stinging critique of monarchical authority in late-Mughal India did not go unchallenged. Rather, there is perhaps no other 19th century Indian Muslim thinker who has been more attacked and flayed for his ideas than him. As mentioned earlier, Ismā‘īl’s religious career and discourses have haunted intra-Sunnī polemics in South Asia and among immigrant South Asian Muslim communities in such places as Britain, South Africa, and the US for several decades. However, it was in his own lifetime that Ismā‘īl had to contend with arguably his most formidable and unsparing intellectual nemesis, the famous Delhi philosopher, poet, and logician, Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī. It is to the latter’s devastating refutation of Ismā‘īl’s discourses on divine sovereignty, composed in a Persian book.

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88 The next chapter examines the relationship between political theology, law, and conceptions of ideal publics in greater depth.
entitled *The Definitive Opinion on the Falsity of Unbelief* (*Tahqīq al-Fatwā fī Ihštāl al-Tughwā*), that I now turn.

**Patrolling the Boundaries of Thinkability: Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī and the Politics of Prophetic Love**

The publication of *Taqviyyat al-Īmān*, coupled with Ismāʿīl’s ongoing reformist activities in Delhi, precipitated a flurry of debates and arguments among the scholarly elite of the city. The content of the book, especially it’s more controversial passages, were intensely debated and dissected. In fact, so divisive was the climate at this time that even Ismāʿīl’s own first cousin, Muḥammad Mūsā Dihlavī (d.1281),89 squared off against him in a famous public debate in 1826.90 As Ismāʿīl’s sermons at the Jāmiʿ Mosque began to draw more and more people, a counter movement to silence his ideas also gathered steam. This movement was spearheaded by the influential Delhi scholar and aristocrat Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī.

Khayrābādī, twenty years younger than Ismāʿīl, is an extremely important figure in the history of South Asian Islam whose thought has received almost no attention in the Western academy. A native of the town of Khayrābād in Northern India, Khayrābādī is most vividly remembered today for his political activities against the British for which he was charged with treason and exiled from India to the Andaman Islands in what is today the country of Myanmar. He died there while in prison in 1862. During his imprisonment, Khayrābādī wrote an autobiography entitled *The Indian Rebel* (*Bāghī-yi Hindustān*). This

89 Muḥammad Mūsā Dihlavī was Shāh Rafīʿal-Dīn’s (Ismāʿīl’s uncle) son.
90 Fazl-i Rasūl Badāyūnī, ‘Āqīda-yi Shaf āʾat Kitāb wa Sunnat kī Rawshnī Mayn (Badāyūn, Tāj al-Fuḥūl Academy, 2009), 84.
book contains fascinating insights into not only Khayrābādī’s career but also the broader Indian political milieu of this decisive era.

Intellectually, Khayrābādī is most well-known for his writings on Islamic philosophy, logic, and for his massive output of Arabic and Persian poetry. His compendia of Arabic poetry alone contain no less than thousands of poems. Khayrābādī also boasted a diverse widespread network of students and disciples not only from all over India but also from Central Asia, Iran and the Arab Middle East. A measure of Khayrābādī’s prominence in the intellectual history of South Asian Islam can be discerned from the fact that even in biographical dictionaries hostile to his thought, such as ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī’s (d.1922) nuzhat al-khawāṭir, he is described as “the foremost scholar of Arabic, philosophy, and logic of his era.”91 In the context of this chapter, an important element of Khayrābādī’s biography relates to his economic background as an affluent aristocrat in 19th century Delhi.

Khayrābādī came from a family with deep ties and affinities to the Mughal nobility in India. In fact, just like his prominent father Fazl-i Imām Khayrābādī (d.1812), he actively served as a high ranking official in the Mughal court. Moreover, even after the fall of the Mughal Empire, Khayrābādī continued to work as an influential bureaucrat in the British Empire, until he was eventually charged with treason and deported from India by the British. In fact, Khayrābādī was so highly regarded among colonial administrators that on his request, the British resident officer in Delhi banned Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl from delivering sermons at the Jamī’ mosque. Khayrābādī’s request was granted after he had

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argued that Ismā‘īl’s sermons posed an imminent threat to communal peace and harmony in Delhi. This ban lasted for 40 days. The historiography is murky on the question of how Khayrābādī’s previously close relations with the British so rapidly deteriorated such that he was declared an enemy of the state and imprisoned in exile until death. His allegedly central role in orchestrating the Indian mutiny of 1857 seems to have represented a major factor in this reversal of relations.\footnote{For a more detailed examination of Khayrābādī’s relations with the British and of his role in the mutiny of 1857, see Jamal Mālik, “Letters, Prison Sketches, and Autobiographical Literature: The Case of Fadl-e Haqq Khairabadi in the Andaman Penal Colony,”} The Indian Economic and Social History Review (March 2006): 77-100.

Khayrābādī’s aristocratic background is well documented in his biographical narratives. For example, in his Bāghī-yi Hindustān, we are told that as a young boy, when Khayrābādī used to go for his Ḥadīth classes at the house of Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz, he would always travel on an elephant, escorted by a specially designated servant. This servant was responsible for protecting young Khayrābādī from the sun by keeping an umbrella over his head. Khayrābādī’s elite status was later exploited by his opponents (and proponents of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl.) For example, in nuzhat al-khawāṭir, it is said, “his mannerisms were those of monarchs, not of religious scholars” (kāna zayyuḥu zayy al-umarā’ dūna al-‘ulamā’). Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī were part of the same urban intellectual milieu of early 19th century Delhi. In fact, as just mentioned, Ismā‘īl’s illustrious uncle Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz was Khayrābādī’s Ḥadīth teacher.\footnote{ʻAbd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī, Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir wa Bahjat al-Masāmī wa-l-Manāẓir, volume 5 (Dār Arafāt: Ṭayyab Academy, 1993), 586.}
However, despite the overlap in the networks of scholarship that these thinkers belonged to, their social imaginaries were sharply opposed. Khayrābādī found Ismāʿīl’s theological program at once coarse and subversive. In his view, under the pretense of defending divine sovereignty, Ismāʿīl was inventing a new tradition that demeaned the Prophet. What Khayrābādī found most threatening about Ismāʿīl’s agenda of reform was the way it opened the possibility of imagining a moral order that disregarded certain ranks, distinctions, and privileges. For Khayrābādī, if the masses were lured into imagining a world that disrespected hierarchies or that refused to situate the Prophet at its cosmic centre, the very foundations of tradition would inevitably unravel.

As Ebrahim Moosa has argued in a forthcoming book, at the heart of the controversy generated by Ismāʿīl was the way in which he challenged the horizons of ‘thinkability.’ Once it became thinkable that God may well create a million new Muḥammads or that he may contravene his own promise, the very logic of tradition was bound to unbound. For Khayrābādī, Ismāʿīl’s cardinal sin was his assumption that prophetic charisma and divine sovereignty were separable. In Khayrābādī’s view, the figure of the Prophet and that of God were part of a common cosmological program. Therefore, any attempt to uncouple the Prophet from the political economy of salvation could only cause chaos.

Khayrābādī composed his refutation of Taqviyyat al-Īmān after one of his disciples showed him passages in the book that deal with the subject of intercession, asking for his opinion. Khayrābādī’s response, published the same year as Taqviyyat al-Īmān, was emphatic. Notice the intensity of contempt and displeasure for Ismāʿīl and his theology in Khayrābādī’s introduction to his treatise, as he thundered:

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The words that come out of this man’s (Ismā’īl’s) mouth are all false. His entire discourse is based on lies and preposterous fabrications. It has no relationship to truth and honesty. While describing the typologies of intercession, he has committed numerous abominations. In direct contradiction to the consensus of both modern and pre-modern luminaries of the tradition, he undermined the exalted status of the most noble of all nobility, the Prophet Muḥammad. In doing so, he prostituted the sanctity of his faith and planted the seed of discord and misguidance in the hearts of the ignorant masses…..This author is either an ignorant fool who does not know the meaning of intercession and is pretending to be a scholar. Or he is a scholar who is demonstrating his ignorance by turning the meaning of intercession on its head.⁹⁵

Khayrābādī accused Ismā’īl of insulting the Prophet, saints, and angels, and passed on him the judgment of unbelief and exit from the fold of Islam. He concluded his treatise with the declaration that Ismā’īl was “an unbeliever who deserved to be put to death.”⁹⁶

In what follows, I examine the thrust of Khayrābādī’s argument for this dramatic judgment. By analyzing his refutation of Ismā’īl’s views on prophetic intercession, I aim to describe a competing political theology that populated the discursive terrain of early 19th century Indian Muslim thought.

**Love as the Marker of Exception:**

To state at the outset, Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī’s discourse on intercession was marked by four key elements: 1) the articulation of a highly gnostic imagination of prophetic authority whereby God’s relationship with the Prophet is characterized by intense love and proximity, 2) the advancement of an extremely loving, generous, and authorial Prophet who restlessly seeks to intercede on behalf of sinful subjects to redeem them of their sins, 3) an argument for a decisively hierarchical intercession model with clear and non-negotiable boundaries between Prophets, saints, and the common folk with respect to


⁹⁶ Ibid, 235.
their stature in God’s court, and 4) the refutation of Shāh Ismāʿīl’s claim in Taqviyyat al-Īmān that the only type of intercession operative in God’s court is intercession by permission (shafāʿat bil idhn).

Khayrābādī’s central charge against Ismāʿīl was that the latter had undermined the exceptionality of prophetic charisma. The status and privilege that God had gifted the Prophet, Khayrābādī contended, was radically exceptional. No other entity was as privileged as the Prophet.97 More crucially, the exceptionality of the Prophet’s status was affirmed by his unrivaled capacity for intercession. The Prophet’s superiority over all other beings in his capacity to intercede authorized the Prophet’s status as the most exceptional of all beings. Intercession was the mechanism of establishing the Prophet’s exceptionality.

Khayrābādī further argued that intercession represented the primary discursive site that ensured the continuity of prophetic charisma in the afterlife. In other words, the esteem attached to the office of prophecy in the temporal world was carried forward in the afterlife through the gift of intercession. In assembling this argument, Khayrābādī cited the prominent 13th century Qurʾān exegete ‘Abdallah Ibn ‘Umar al-Baydāwī (d.1286) who had said “esteem in this world is prophecy and esteem in the afterlife is intercession” (al-wajāha fi-l-dunya al-nubūwwa wa fi-l-ākhira al-shafāʿa).98

In fact, Khayrābādī continued, the Prophet’s status in the afterlife will be even higher than what it was in the temporal world. On the Day of Judgment, he will be rewarded for his exemplary conduct and obedience to God with the capacity to intercede for his

97 Ibid, 89.
98 Quoted in Ibid, 74.
community. In other words, for Khayrābādī, the gift of intercession was grammatically bound up with the institution of prophecy. Intercession enabled the perpetuity of prophetic charisma in the afterlife. As a corollary, any attempt to compromise the Prophet’s capacity to intercede represented a direct assault on the very logic of prophecy. That is why Ismā‘īl’s discourse on intercession was anathematic to Khayrābādī.

In addition, Khayrābādī found particularly problematic the hyperbole of Ismā‘īl’s rhetoric. He argued that Ismā‘īl’s provocative statements were hardly relevant to the latter’s supposed argument about the primacy of divine sovereignty. For instance, the statement about God’s capacity “to create a million new Muḥammads” was an unnecessary provocation with no substantive relationship with restoring divine sovereignty.

Khayrābādī explained his point as follows.

“Suppose,” he hypothesized, “that a king was completely subservient to a minister or vizier in the workings of his kingdom. The king did whatever that minister told him to do. Now in order to restore this king’s sovereignty, it makes no sense to say that he may well make a million new ministers, or that he may turn the masses into ministers. How does that at all resolve the problem of the minister’s interference in the king’s governance over his kingdom?”99 All that Ismā‘īl needed to say, Khayrābādī advised, was that “there is no possibility of any interference in God’s industry of sovereignty (kārkhāna-yi qudrat).”100 Instead of putting forward this simple proposition, Khayrābādī regretted, Ismā‘īl had resorted to playing rhetorical games that did nothing to advance his argument and that

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99 Ibid, 137.
100 Ibid.
insulted the Prophet in the process. This was at once a show of poor judgment and of poor etiquette, he argued. Apart from what he saw as Ismā‘īl’s penchant for unconstructive rhetorical flourishes, Khayrābādī also repudiated him for ignoring the significance of love to the conceptual architecture of God’s relationship with the Prophet.

The centerpiece of Khayrābādī’s theology pivoted on the intensity of the lover-beloved relationship between God and the Prophet. Satisfying the demands of one’s beloved, he argued, represents an essential requirement for a relationship based on love to succeed and thrive. Therefore, just as a true lover would never do or say anything that hurts, disappoints, or disrespects his beloved, God also takes great care in ensuring the satisfaction of his most beloved subject, the Prophet.

Moreover, for a relationship of love to survive, it is necessary for the lover to accept his beloved’s petitions advanced on someone else’s behalf. Therefore, in sharp contrast to Ismā‘īl, Khayrābādī unreservedly permitted the operation of intercession based on high esteem (wajāhat) and love (muḥabbat) in God’s court. Since God has declared the Prophet as his most beloved subject, he will always follow through on the latter’s petitions on behalf of sinful people. In emphasizing the intense proximity that marks God’s relationship to those who are beloved to him, Khayrābādī quoted the following Ḥadīth Qudsi:

101 A Ḥadīth Qudsi refers to a prophetic saying in which the Prophet transmitted God’s words. Unlike a regular prophetic saying, the chain of transmission (isnād) for a Ḥadīth Qudsi originates not with the Prophet but with God.

102 Khayrābādī, 265.
Khayrābādī argued that this Ḥadīth Qudsī establishes beyond doubt the extremely elevated stature of people beloved to God. However, Khayrābādī emphasized that the politics of love in God’s court is neither democratic nor egalitarian. Instead, the programmatic that undergirds his dispensation of love is unabashedly hierarchical. There is a clear hierarchy in the degree of proximity accorded by God to his human subjects. Moreover, the efficacy of someone’s intercession also depends on the rank and position he holds in God’s court. The efficacy of intercession depended on the degree to which God loved and respected the intercessor. To be more accurate, the capacity to intercede demonstrated God’s love for the intercessor.

In Khayrābādī’s imaginary, love was inseparable from power. Love authorized distinction. Love represented the curator of the hierarchy of salvific authority. Intercession in turn was the gift of love, a gift that signaled the rank of an entity in relation to others. Therefore, the supplications and petitions of prophets and pious saints were more likely to be answered than those of the common folk and sinful people. Khayrābādī authorized this hierarchical arrangement of salvific power by citing the Qur’ānic verse: “Those apostles we endowed with gifts, some above others: To one of them God spoke; others He raised to degrees (of honor).”

Khayrābādī agreed with Ismā‘īl that the sovereignty of the divine is absolute, exclusive, and unalterable. Further, all humans, angels, prophets, illiterates, kings, and slaves are equally obligated to demonstrate their complete servitude (bandagi) to God.

103 Qur’ān, 2:253.
However, Khayrābādī insisted that there was no contradiction between the absoluteness of divine sovereignty and the carefully calibrated hierarchy according to which God had ordered his creation. Each entity in God’s court had been assigned a specified status (manṣab) and degree of exaltedness.

He explained that while some entities were bestowed with proximity and honor, others were shunned as rejected, lost, or misguided. The degree of esteem and authority accorded to each entity in God’s court corresponded with his stature. A beloved of the divine can never occupy the same stature as a rejected one and so on. Concomitantly, the effectiveness of an intercessor’s petitions on behalf of sinners also corresponded with his stature and with the intensity of God’s love for him. Put differently, an intercessor’s capacity to intercede depended on his position in the bureaucracy of divine love. Moreover, and this was the most important point, God’s acceptance of intercession affirmed that position.104

Forgiving a sinner for his crimes was only an apparent function of intercession. More crucially, the practice of intercession reinforced the distinguished status occupied by God’s beloveds. As Khayrābādī put it, “the acceptance of an intercession is among the effects of love (āsār-i muḥabbat).”105 He further elucidated his point by quoting the poignant Persian couplet:

Someone asked a lover: which is better? Union with the beloved or his separation

The lover replied: whatever pleases the beloved

(bi gufta waṣal bah ya hajar az dūst)

104 Khayrābādī, 209.
In the divine politics of love, no entity, Khayrābādī emphatically argued, occupied a more noble, exalted, and authorial status than the Prophet Muḥammad. As he wrote, “on the Day of Judgment, no one will be allowed to speak (intercede) in God’s court except Muḥammad.”¹⁰⁷ In contrast to Ismā‘īl who found the attachment of extraordinary intercessory capacities to the Prophet a threat to divine sovereignty, Khayrābādī’s discourse on intercession was centered on a gnostic prophetology of Muḥammad.¹⁰⁸

In fact, Khayrābādī declared that demonstrating one’s love for the Prophet was a necessary condition for having faith. “A faithful Muslim,” as he put it, “must consider the Prophet more beloved than his own self, father, son, and the rest of humanity.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, for Khayrābādī, there was no tension between divine and prophetic authority. It was precisely by affirming the cosmic qualities of the Prophet that a subject demonstrated his servitude for the divine. This view, Khayrābādī argued, was clearly stated in the Qurʾān when God said to the Prophet, “verily those who pledge their allegiance to you pledge their allegiance to me. The hand of God is over their hands.”¹¹⁰ Khayrābādī also cited a number of Ḥadīth that for him, incontrovertibly demonstrated the nobility of the Prophet’s persona.

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⁹⁶ bi gufta har cheh mayl-i khāṭir-i īst

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 93.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 82.
¹⁰⁸ For an illuminating overview of such traditions of prophetic devotion in Islam, see Carl Ernst, “Muhammad as the Pole of Existence,” in Jonathan Brockopp ed. Cambridge Companion to Muhammad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Also see Anne Marie Schimmel, And Muhammad is his Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
¹¹⁰ Qurʾān, 48:10.
For example, “when angels roam around the world, they most frequently visit houses where people called Muḥammad live. This gesture is meant as a show of reverence for Muḥammad’s majestic authority.”\(^{111}\) Also, “On the day of judgment, the Prophet will be occupied with nothing other than interceding on behalf of his people. While all the other prophets will worry for their own fate and cry “myself, myself (nafsī, nafsī), the Prophet will only cry “my community, my community (ummatī, ummatī).”\(^{112}\)

Perhaps most illustrative of how Khayrābādī imagined the interaction of divine and prophetic authority was his narration of the following prophetic report:

On the Day of Judgment, while all the other prophets will be stationed at their respective pulpits (minbar), I will be standing at the most elevated part of God’s court. God will ask me, “oh my beloved, what do you want me to do with your community?” I will reply, “Oh God, account for them quickly.” Then they (the Muslim community) will be brought in and accounted for. Some of them will go to heaven because of God’s mercy and some of them because of my intercession.\(^{113}\)

Also notice the comprehensiveness of the Prophet’s care for his community’s salvation as communicated in this report, “on the day of judgment I will tirelessly intercede on behalf of my community, even for those who were otherwise been destined to go to hell, to the extent that the doorman of hell will say to me, you did not allow anyone in your community taste the wrath of God’s anger.”\(^{114}\)

The two overarching arguments that undergirded Khayrābādī’s discussion on intercession then were as follows: 1) God always accepts Muḥammad’s petitions on behalf of sinners because of the latter’s status

\(^{111}\) Khayrābādī, 100.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, 131.

\(^{113}\) Ibid, 132.

\(^{114}\) Ibid, 133.
as the most beloved and exalted member of His court, and 2) the Prophet will work incessantly on the Day of Judgment to ensure that whoever seeks his intercession is granted forgiveness and a place in heaven.

**Distinguishing Request and Command:**

Khayrābādī’s model of intercession raises an obvious question; if God always heeds the petitions of his beloved (the Prophet) then what are we to make of God’s own sovereignty in managing the affairs of His court? In other words, if God never rejects the petitions advanced by the Prophet, then what is the nature of God’s own legislative authority? Khayrābādī addressed these potential doubts by drawing on and emphasizing the distinction between a petition (*sifārish*) and a demand (*ṭalab*). God’s acceptance of a petition does not imply that an agent other than Him possesses any authority over His kingdom. God responds favorably to the petitions of those close and beloved to Him to reinforce their esteemed status in His court. However, the decision to accept or reject a petition remains strictly His personal prerogative. In short, God accepts His beloveds’ petitions not under compulsion or duress but out of love.¹¹⁵

Here, Khayrābādī treaded a slippery slope while negotiating the interplay of divine and prophetic authority. On the one hand, God is the ultimate sovereign over His kingdom who does not take orders from anyone. On the other hand, the Prophet enjoys such an elevated and authorial status in God’s court that his petitions are never rejected. Does this risk the confusion of divine and prophetic authority? In Khayrābādī’s view, no it does not. The key variable that allowed him to separate these two modalities of

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¹¹⁵ Ibid, 262-70.
authority was that of causation. God accepts a petition not because of any fear or duress but because of His love for the petitioner.

Khayrābādī further reasoned that if it were duress that caused God to accept petitions, then He cannot be said to have any sovereignty over his kingdom to begin with. In that situation, God would be akin to a powerless monarch who is only a ruler in appearance. In reality, it is his ministers who effectively control all the workings of his kingdom. Such a politically castrated monarch acquiesces to whatever his associates tell him to do. He is fearful that not obliging to their demands would result in him losing his already superficial grip on power. This kind of a situation, Khayrābādī argued, can never exist in God’s court.

Khayrābādī chastised Ismā‘īl precisely for not taking into account this crucial distinction between a request and a demand. A request for intercession and outright coercion are two completely separate things, he explained. It is not fear but the desire to honor and affirm the exalted status of a beloved that drives a sovereign’s decision to accept an intercessor’s request. What Ismā‘īl failed to understand, Khayrābādī argued, is that love can serve as the exclusive cause for the acceptance of intercession, independent of any coercion or duress. Khayrābādī was particularly critical of Ismā‘īl for undermining the liberating capacity of prophetic munificence and for “spreading among the masses the poison of hopelessness (nā-umīdī).” As he poignantly wrote, “this man (Ismā‘īl) does not believe in hope. He wants to deprive people from the sweetness of prophetic mercy; he wants to poison them with his vulgar (bāzārī) thoughts and whims (awhām).”

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Khayrābādī also took Ismā‘īl to task for completely misrepresenting the concept of intercession by permission. Remember, Ismā‘īl had described intercession by permission as the situation in which the king, prior to receiving a request for intercession, had already decided to pardon the criminal. Intercession only served to reinforce this original inclination; it did not cause the King’s decision. Khayrābādī took serious exception to this logic. He argued that for intercession to not be useless and superfluous, it must represent the immediate cause for a criminal’s exoneration. According to Khayrābādī, Ismā‘īl’s contention that intercession by permission only worked if the king had already decided to pardon a criminal rendered the very idea of intercession meaningless. Of what good is intercession, he protested, if the king has already shown his mercy on a sinner prior to receiving a petition for intercession. As he summed up, “intercession is only valid when it is effective.”

In Schmittian terms, Khayrābādī represented a custodian of a monarchical social imaginary par excellence. He was not only a believer in the state of exception—the miracle of intercession—he stipulated it as a necessary condition for a commoner to have any chance of absolving his sins in God’s court. Khayrābādī explicitly declared that no one will be able to attain repentance on the Day of Judgment without seeking Muḥammad’s intercession. Particularly instructive in this context is how Khayrābādī’s subjectivity and position in society was revealed in the way he articulated his argument for the capaciousness of prophetic authority.

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117 Ibid, 83.
118 Ibid, 209.
The symbolism of Mughal bureaucracy permeated Khayrābādī’s discourse on intercession. For example, while describing the scene on the Day of Judgment, Khayrābādī sketched a vivid image of the Prophet sifting through the files (dafātir) of sinners who requested his intercession. The Prophet goes through all the files himself and grants each of his plaintiffs an executive pardon, and in effect a place in heaven. Indeed, Khayrābādī’s conception of the Prophet as the most exalted officer in God’s court was intimately connected to a larger project of safeguarding a political ethos founded on hierarchies and distinctions.

To avoid any confusion, let me be absolutely clear that I do not wish to suggest a neat causal relationship between Khayrābādī’s or for that matter Ismā‘īl’s theological and political imaginaries. Quite to the contrary, I have a fundamental doubt about the very labor of conceptualizing theology and politics as two distinct discursive economies that are readily available for the exercise of determining what causes what. Instead, in this chapter, I have tried to explore the often latent imaginaries of the political, broadly conceived, that inform arguments focused on such seemingly theological concepts as divine sovereignty and prophetic authority. It is the synchronicity, not the causality, of the theological and the political that I have tried to capture. The polemical moment described in this chapter brought into central view two radically opposed narratives of political theology.

On the one hand, Ismā‘īl emphasized the Prophet’s humanity as part of a larger political program that bound the promise of individual freedom to unyieldingly affirming the radical alterity of divine sovereignty. Moreover, for him, any fissure in the exclusivity of the divine capacity to enact the exception would inevitably undermine the exclusivity
of His sovereignty. In contrast, Khayrābādī found nothing less than anathema even the possibility of disturbing a hierarchy of salvific authority that positioned the Prophet at its apogee. Further, in his view, the exception was a gift that announced the relative privilege enjoyed by an entity in God’s court. The divine gift of intercession secured the Prophet’s status as the most exalted and venerated being. Moreover, that gift ensured the continuity of the Prophet’s charisma in the afterlife.

Therefore, for Khayrābādī, any attempt to steal the Prophet’s gift of intercession constituted an intolerable doctrinal breech that threatened to irreparably fracture the logic of tradition. This was the underlying source of alarm that spiraled him to anathematize Ismāʿīl. Both Ismāʿīl’s and Khayrābādī’s political and theological imaginaries were inextricably intertwined. However, the specific trajectories of their political theologies were radically opposed.

**Conclusion:**

Fazl-i Ḩaqq Khayrābādī and Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl’s polemic over prophetic intercession provides us with an important snapshot of the sociology of sovereignty during early 19th century India. This polemic was authorized by a specific conjuncture in the political history of South Asia, one marked by the ascendancy of the British and the waning of the Mughal Empire. As Carl Schmitt had argued, political and theological imaginaries are always intertwined. The narrative of Western modernity, he further claimed, was marked by the emergence of a political theology that shifted the locus of sovereignty to the figure of the modern citizen. Moreover, encoded into this new political theology was a discourse of rationalism that sought to transcend theological states of
exception, as the authority to enact the exception was increasingly arrogated by the modern state.

But how might the polemical moment described in this chapter point to the limits of Schmitt’s theory of political theology? More precisely, can this polemic be conceptualized as a competition between a newly emerging modern consciousness and a traditional social imaginary? Should we think of a figure like Ismā‘īl as a native reformer who through his political theology furthered a modern episteme critical of hierarchies, distinctions, and privileges? Put differently, was his drive to outlaw forms of life that in his view threatened divine sovereignty an expression of a newly emerging, colonially inspired, Islamic modernity in South Asia? To an extent I am sympathetic to answering these questions in the affirmative.

As I previously argued, the ontotheological framework of Ismā‘īl’s discourse inextricably connected the enunciation of an Indian Muslim identity with the affirmation of divine sovereignty in the public sphere. Therefore, his theology of transcendence was as much about the construction of a reformed Indian Muslim subject as it was about God. Ismā‘īl’s argument against prophetic intercession did not explicitly call for the cultivation of popular sovereignty in a nationalist sense. However, central to his political theology was the promise of a subject who by affirming the radical alterity of divine sovereignty secured radical proximity to the divine. This kind of an ontotheological political theology seems quite consistent with Schmitt’s description of a modern notion of sovereignty
whereby “the will of the people becomes identical to God’s will; it is in the voice of the people that God’s voice is heard.”

Moreover, the propogation of Ismā‘īl’s reformist program was indebted to the discursive and institutional conditions inaugurated by the British in 19th century India. The vernacularization of languages through which Urdū emerged as the lingua franca of the Indian Muslim scholarly elite, the expansion of print, the efflorescence of commerce and information networks; these were all developments that played an important role in the flourishing of native traditions of reform. For instance, the kind of popularity and circulation achieved by a text like *Taqviyyat al-Īmān* would have been unimaginable prior to the technologies of print inaugurated by the British. However, all that said, I would also caution against reading such moments of Muslim reform as a reaction to the modernizing conditions of British colonial modernity.

It is difficult not to discern an elective affinity between Muslim reformist discourses eager to restore divine sovereignty and modern colonial narratives of rationality. Both these discursive regimes were animated by the desire to empower the individual subject (or believer) through the promise of accessing a transcendent truth (divine or otherwise) without recourse to hierarchies. They were both heavily invested in securing the immediacy of the transcendent. However, this apparent affinity does not translate into a relationship of imposition and reaction.

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It would be problematic to conceptualize Muslim reformist discourses, like Ismā‘īl’s, as instantiations of a “Modern Protestant Islam” that was reacting to the imposition of a dominant colonial idiom. Why? Because to argue that the rationality of colonialism first infected and then transformed native reformist thought operates on the unsound assumption that “colonial rationality” and “native reform” constitute two stable, unchanging discursive domains that are readily available for the study of their interaction and influence. Such a view obscures instead of making visible the internal diversity of both Muslim reformist thought and that of colonialism. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that Ismā‘īl had any exposure to colonial knowledges on religion or that he was familiar with British institutions of learning. In this situation, it is difficult to make the argument that his focus on the restoration of divine sovereignty or his critique of hierarchies in the theological arena was inspired by the colonial episteme.

Rather, it would be more accurate to argue that Ismā‘īl’s reformist program occupied a parallel discursive domain. His discourse on divine sovereignty may have simulated colonial narratives of religious authenticity but it was not derived from the colonial discursive economy. The conceptual apparatus that informed his desire for reform was not imposed on him by colonial power. In other words, it is not as if Ismā‘īl was conscripted into a colonial political rationality that was not of his own making. His rationality of reform was as much his own as it was anyone else’s. In fact, he was among the central architects of that rationality in the Indian Muslim reform tradition. To sum up: certainly, the modernizing conditions of colonialism played a pivotal role in catalyzing native traditions of moral arguments such as Ismā‘īl’s polemic with Khayrābādī.
However, such moments of antagonism were animated by a set of moral virtues, questions, and anxieties that were internal to their discourse.

In order to provide a thick description of how the limits of a discursive tradition are authoritatively contested, it is precisely these logics and rationalities that must demand our attention. In this chapter I have pursued such a line of inquiry by focusing on a specific polemical moment in early 19th century Muslim India when the boundaries of religion and reform were battled out. By examining Ismā‘īl’s and Khayrābādī’s competing views on prophetic intercession, I have shown ways in which the limits of religion and unbelief, the normative and the heretical, become available as objects of authoritative debate and argument.

Most importantly, I have sought to show that the rival logics of tradition made centrally visible during this polemical moment cannot be canonized into such binaries as traditional/modern, mystical/rational, religious/secular, liberal/conservative, and so on. For instance, one could not have entered the discursive site of Ismā‘īl’s and Khayrābādī’s polemic armed with a priori assumptions about the knowledges, logics, and stakes that animated it.

The rival narratives of tradition and its limits that these scholars articulated were authorized within the contingent conjuncture of their polemical encounter. It was precisely the antagonistic space of their polemic that obliged them to confront the other’s argument and destabilize its normative coherency; that allowed them to authoritatively debate the question of what can and cannot count as Islam. The identity of Khayrābādī’s argument depended on establishing the “otherness” of Ismā‘īl’s and vice versa. Each was
the other’s condition of possibility. It would be unsound to read this polemic as a contest between traditionalism and modernism because such a framing depends on the canonization of what does and does not count as tradition (or for that matter modernity) prior to the conjuncture in which rival discourses battle out that question in centrally visible ways.

To ascribe labels such as “rationalist,” “traditionalist,” “modernist” on agents who imagine themselves as the exclusive custodians of a religion’s normative boundaries is to replicate the ideological claims that inhere in these categories. Such categories are more reflective of the inability of Western disciplinary efforts to canonize native discourses than of the conjunctures in which those discourses become centrally visible.

The rivalry between Ismā‘īl and Khayrābādī discontinued after Ismā‘īl’s death in 1831. However, the polemic over prophetic authority they had sparked only metastasized in the following decades. In the next few chapters, I shift my focus to that later context of intra-Muslim rivalries in North India during the latter half of the 19th century. Thematically, I will now consider the competing understandings of law and normative practice in everyday life corresponding to the competing political theologies discussed in this chapter.

How does a political theology invested in the radical sovereignty of the divine translate into a legal imaginary invested in the promise of regulating embodied practices in a way that affirms that sovereignty? That is the major conceptual thread connecting the following chapter to the one just concluded. I will address this question by focusing on
one of the most contentious categories in Islam that is located precisely at the nexus of law, theology, and everyday practice; the category of heretical innovation (bid‘a).
Chapter 2
Law, Sovereignty, and the Boundaries of Normative Practice

On a Friday afternoon in 1890, an Englishman visited the town of Deoband in Uttar Pradesh, India. Interested in learning more about the local community and their devotional practices, he asked Hājī Muḥammad ʿĀbid Ḥusayn, one of the less well-known founders of the Dār al-ʿUlūm Deoband, the prestigious seminary of the town, if he could observe how the Friday congregational prayers were conducted. ʿĀbid Ḥusayn willingly obliged the Englishman’s request and took him to Deoband's congregational mosque. It so happened that Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (d.1905), another one of the madrasa's founders and a leading scholar in the Deoband hierarchy was also visiting the town and thus attended the weekly congregational prayer. Since it was the month of rabī‘ al-awwal during which the Prophet was born, the local prayer-leader (imām) devoted his Friday sermon to the virtues of the mawlid ceremony (the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday).

Gangohī was bitterly opposed to the mawlid as practiced in India. He considered it a serious heretical innovation, one that lacked a precedent in normative tradition of the pious ancestors. Moreover, in Gangohī’s view, the mawlid had become terminally corrupted because the ignorant masses, in his view, turned the ritual into an orgy of transgressions. Given his disposition towards mawlid, Gangohī grew increasingly agitated as he listened to a sermon expounding on its sanctity. At some point during the sermon Gangohī lost it and interrupted the preacher, by addressing him: “Mawlānā,
please wrap up your sermon.”

The preacher, who clearly did not recognize Gangohī, reproached him in terms of the etiquette of prayer: “Be quiet, it is forbidden (harām) to interrupt a Friday sermon,” the preacher cautioned. “Don’t you lecture me on what is halāl and harām,” an infuriated Gangohī retorted. "You deserve be taken by your hand and dragged down the pulpit," he thundered. "According to the rules of jurisprudence (fiqh), one ought to shorten the sermon and lengthen the prayers. You are doing the exact opposite,” Gangohī lectured him.” “Be Quiet,” the preacher reproached him again.

Some of the congregants now offended by the preacher’s unruly attitude towards Gangohī, refused to pray behind him. They requested Gangohī to lead the prayers but he declined fearing that some people might think he had orchestrated the altercation in order to gain control of the pulpit. Eventually, Muḥammad Yaʿqūb Nānautvī, another prominent Deoband scholar and a close associate of Gangohī led the prayers. Gangohī hastily left the mosque after the prayers. Witnessing the spectacle was the Englishman who said to Yaʿqūb Nānautvī: “Call that Wahhābī over here who rudely interrupted the sermon and was rambling like a buffoon for the longest time ever.”

In the face of the Englishman's offending comments Nānautvī restrained himself, fearing that were he to oppose the visitor then members of the already agitated congregation might join in the fray with unpredictable consequences. Nānautvī pretended as if he did not hear the Englishman and busied himself in rituals. In doing so he averted

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2 We are not told about the Englishman’s background or in what language he communicated with the local congregants, though one can guess that it was some variety of broken Urdu.
what could potentially have escalated into chaos and bedlam.\(^4\)

This narrative provides us with a potent snapshot of the climate of bitter polemics that enveloped the Muslim learned elite of North India during the late 19\(^{th}\) century. As this story shows, debates over the limits of the Prophet’s normative model, especially with regard to the legitimacy of controversial popular conventions such as the Prophet’s birthday celebration resulted in heated divisions. Over time these tensions spiraled into rampant mutual anathematizing and name-calling among different Muslim groups across North India. There was nothing new for prominent Indian Muslim scholars to be engaged in vitriolic debates over questions of doxology and normative practice.

Even during the heyday of Muslim power in North India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was common to find individual Muslim scholars embroiled in bitter and often very personal intellectual disputes. This trend continued until the early half of the 19\(^{th}\) century, as we saw in the previous chapter on Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī’s polemic over the legitimacy of prophetic intercession. However, the polemical fervor of the late 19\(^{th}\) century was quite different from previous eras in important ways.

Most notably, in the period following the 1857 mutiny, (in which Indian Muslims were brutally defeated by the British), the learned elite of Muslim India were divided into competing ‘ideological orientations’ (masālik, sing. maslak), each with contrasting programs of religious reform. Among the most prominent of these reform movements was the Islamic seminary cum ideological orientation, the Deoband Madrasa. The

\(^4\)Ibid.
Deoband Madrasa was established in the North Indian town of Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, in 1867 by a group of prominent Indian Muslim scholars (‘ulamā’). More specifically, it was the charismatic scholars Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī and Qāsim Nānautvī (d.1877) who set the foundations of this educational institution of religious learning that has impacted the intellectual, social, and political history of South Asian Islam in profound ways. Today, some 150 years later, with its parent institution in India, the Deoband School boasts the largest network of satellite madrasas all over Pakistan, Bangladesh as well as neighboring countries in Asia and beyond, in countries as far afield as those located in the Caribbean, South Africa, Britain, and the United States. Deobandī madrasas number circa 50,000 to 60,000 institutions on the Indian sub-continent alone, with the largest concentration in India.

However, it is important to stress here that although numerous Islamic seminaries in various countries call themselves “Deobandī,” their ties to the founding school in the town of Deoband, which continues to exist until today, may well be only tenuous or even non-existent. This is an important point because it illustrates that apart from the physical institution of the seminary, the term “Deobandī” also connotes a certain ideology, or a particular thought-style within Sunnī Islam in the modern world.

In late 19th century India and in the following decades, among traditionally educated scholars, the authority of the Deoband Madrasa was most eagerly challenged by its chief
competitors, the Barelvi and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth schools. These rival ideological formations, i.e., the Deobandīs, Barelvis, and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, articulated overlapping yet contrasting narratives of ideal norms of life and ways of interpreting those norms.

The Ahl-i Ḥadīth School, in contrast to the Barelvis and Deobandīs, rejected the canonical authority of the four established academies of Sunnī law. They argued for an interpretive canvass that restricted the sources of religious norms to the Qur’ān and the normative model of the Prophet. Apart from this hermeneutical disagreement, Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars also quarreled with their Indian Ḥanafī counterparts on the normative legitimacy of three specific practices related to the performance of the five-fold daily prayers: raising both hands (raf‘ al-yadayn) during prayers, saying “Āmīn” aloud (āmīn bil-jahr), and reciting the Fātiḥa behind a prayer leader (fatiḥa khalf al-imām).

The rivalry between Deobandī and Barelvi scholars on the other hand, centered on competing imaginaries of the Prophet’s charisma and the limits of his normative model. Their conflicts, as this and the next two chapters will show, focused on the critical questions of how the prophetic norm (sunna) must manifest in the everyday lives of the masses and how to guard religious practice from the threat of heretical innovations.

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5 The Barelvi ideology was founded by the charismatic and prolific 19th century scholar Aḥmad Razā Khān, who was from the North Indian town of Baraylī (hence the name Barelvi for his followers and group.) Although also a Ḥanafī jurist, Khān vigorously opposed the Deoband scholars and Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl for what he saw as their heretical ideas. The next chapter considers his scathing critique of Deobandi thought in detail.

6 The Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement represents a prominent Indian Sunnī reformist outfit that also emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. It distinguishes itself from both Barelvis and Deobandīs on account of not recognizing the canonical authority of the four major schools of Sunnī law. Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars rely solely on the Qur’ān and the Sunna as sources of religious norms. The most well-known thinker associated with the Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement is Siddīq Ḥasan Khān (d.1890) who wrote prolifically and almost exclusively in Arabic on various topics, most notably theology and belief.
(bida’, sing. bid’a). The nature and scope of the Prophet’s knowledge was also a pivotal point of disagreement (discussed in chapter 4.)

The growth of the Deoband School into a movement in 1867 and the formation of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth and Barelvī ideologies decisively altered the intellectual landscape of Sunnī South Asian Islam. From this moment, the production and dissemination of knowledge took on an unprecedented group-centered orientation. The concept of maslak which in its Urdu modality can best be rendered as an “ideological orientation” flowered in the latter half of the 19th century like it had never before in Muslim India. The ideological reification of Sunnī Islam in North India was accompanied by intensified debates over the boundaries of normative practice in the religion.

All reformist groups, including Deobandīs, Barelvīs and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, vigorously participated in the ensuing industry of polemical activity. The most well-known of these polemics, however, were those between the Barelvīs and Deobandīs that pit against one another major Barelvī scholars such as the founder of the school, Aḥmad Razā Khān and their Deobandī counterparts including the pioneers of Deoband Qāsim Nānautvī 7 and Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, and their later successors such as Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī (d.1927) and Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī. As just mentioned, despite being affiliated to the same Ḥanafī school of Sunnī law, these two groups were bitterly opposed in the way they imagined the limits of the Prophet’s normative model and its institution in the public sphere.

7 To be precise, Nānautvī and Khān did not spar against one another directly. However, a major part of Khān’s later attack on the Deobandī ideology was centered on Nānautvī’s thoughts, especially the controversy surrounding his position on God’s capacity to produce a second Muḥammad (imkān-i naẓīr) as presented in Nānautvī’s book Tahzīr al-Nās.
Louis Dumont noted in the context of Hindu communalism in modern India that “with the replacement of the king as sovereign, Dharma is replaced by the People as a collective individual mirroring itself in a territory.” Similarly, in the context of Islam in colonial India, the normative model of the Prophet emerged as a synecdoche representing the entirety of law, *sharī'a*. The central locus of normativity was now firmly grounded in the figure of the Prophet. In the absence of any tangible and legitimate political authority, the Prophet’s normative example emerged as the primary discursive arena where opposing factions of North Indian ‘ulamā’ articulated and contested their religious authority. But each rival group defined prophetic normativity very differently, even antithetically. In this regard, the case of the Barelvī-Deobandī polemics is particularly illustrative.

At the heart of Deoband’s reformist platform was an egalitarian imaginary of Prophet Muḥammad’s authority. For example, in the view of Deobandī scholars, calling the Prophet one’s brother would not amount to offensive or disrespectful speech or conduct. On the contrary, such an affirmation of the Prophet’s human qualities was to be encouraged. The well-known prophetic saying: “I am unlike any of you” (*lastū ka ahadin minkum*) only referred to Muḥammad’s unique status as a recipient of divine revelation, the Deobandīs argued. In all other matters of human existence, he was much like anyone else. Therefore, for the Deobandī scholars, it was intolerable to believe that the Prophet possessed knowledge of the unknown (*‘ilm al-ghayb*). As I will show in chapter 4, this theological position was pivotal to their opposition to rituals such as the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, during which he personally appeared at multiple gatherings.

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simultaneously. In a manner very similar to Shāh Muḥammad Ismā’īl, for the pioneers of Deoband, the perfection of Muḥammad’s prophecy was enabled by the perfection of his humanity.

As Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī once said while contrasting the Deoband School against its opponents, “they turn the Prophet into a God but a defective one. We understand him to be a servant (of God) but a perfect one. So they detract from the Prophet’s authority and we affirm his perfection (bid’atī huzūr ko ālih māntay hayn magar nāqiṣ. Ham unhayn ‘abd māntay hayn magar kāmil. Tuh tum huzūr kī tanqīṣ kartay ho awr ham kamāl ke qā’īl hayn).”9 Thānvī tried to authorize the Deobandī emphasis on the humanity of the Prophet by pointing to the proclamation uttered by all Muslims during the five daily prayers: “I bear witness that there is no God except Allah and that Muḥammad is his servant and his messenger.” What must be noticed in this proclamation, Thānvī instructed, was that the affirmation of Muḥammad’s servitude to God preceded the mention of his role as a messenger. Therefore, the Prophet’s position as God’s servant (‘abduh) took priority over his status as God’s messenger (rasūluh). The Prophet’s humanity was the most defining aspect of his persona.10

In contrast, the centerpiece of the Barelvī ideology valorized above all the element of love characterizing the Prophet’s relationship with God. Much like Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī whom they held in great reverence, for the Barelvīs, any normative argument that might undermine the Prophet’s charisma as God’s most beloved subject, such as questioning his ability to intercede on behalf of sinners or calling his birthday celebration

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a heresy was nothing short of anathema. Moreover, it was not only distasteful but also heretical for anyone to even ponder, let alone actualize, such utterances as calling the Prophet one’s brother. Any speech or conduct that even theoretically punctured the aura of Muḥammad’s prophethood was unpalatable to Barelvī sensibilities. However, as I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, it would be very inaccurate to frame the Deobandī-Barelvī rivalry as one between proponents of populist Sufism (Barelvīs) and custodians of legal conservatism (Deobandīs).

Deobandīs and Barelvīs were deeply invested in both Ḥanafī law and Sufism. Where they differed from one another was on the question of what it meant to be a Sunnī Ḥanafī Muslim under conditions of colonialism. Their opposition was based on competing ideologies of prophetic normativity, not on claims to disparate canons of law. It is crucial to make this distinction between madhāhib (canonical schools of law) and masālik (ideological orientations) to recognize the epistemic neighborliness underlying the Deobandī-Barelvī dispute. It was precisely because these two groups were so similar in their broad outlines, and in the potential clientele they sought to attract, that their polemics were often so personal and caustic.

The Deobandī-Barelvī polemics began in the late nineteenth century, a few decades after Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s death in 1831. However, the figure of Ismā‘īl was at the center of these polemics. The pioneers of Deoband vigorously defended his views and heralded him as an exemplary religious reformer. For instance, once while commenting on some of Ismā‘īl’s controversial statements in Taqviyyat al-Īmān, Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī declared: “Taqviyyat al-Īmān is a majestic book that contains the very essence of the Qur’ān and the Hadīth. Its author was a person of great repute. Anyone who calls
him (Ismā‘īl) an unbeliever or of bad character is himself Satanic and cursed by God.”

Hermeneutically, Ismā‘īl’s reform project was marked by a more non-conformist streak than that of the Deoband pioneers.

Remember, in Taqviyyat al-Īmān, Ismā‘īl had urged the masses to not rely on specialist scholars for accessing and interpreting normative sources of the religion such as the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth. Moreover, although Ismā‘īl was well versed in Ḥanafī jurisprudence, he did not identify himself as a Ḥanafī jurist. In fact, as I discussed in the previous chapter, on certain contentious issues such as raising both hands during prayers (raf‘ al-yadayn), Ismā‘īl had departed from the practice of Ḥanafī scholars in his own family, causing for them much consternation. Therefore, for the Deoband pioneers, who were staunch Ḥanafīs and who vigorously opposed the non-conformist Ahl-i Ḥadīth School, to so passionately embrace and defend Ismā‘īl seems somewhat odd. There are a couple of factors that may explain this apparent inconsistency. First, unlike the late 19th century Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars, Ismā‘īl did not reject the principle of conforming to a canonical school of law (taqlīd) or demean the authority of esteemed Ḥanafī scholars of the past. So in Ismā‘īl’s discourse, one does not find any discernible discursive landmines on the question of conforming to a canonical school of law that may have offended the Ḥanafī sensibilities of Deoband scholars.

Secondly, in Ismā‘īl the Deoband pioneers found an excellent spokesperson for their own reform agenda. Ismā‘īl’s focus on the theme of restoring divine sovereignty, and as I will show in this chapter, his views on the limits of innovation in everyday practice

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deeply resonated with the Deoband ideology. Thus, despite differences of hermeneutical temperaments, the doctrinal affinity between Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers enabled between them a robust strategic alliance.

On the other hand, Aḥmad Razā Khān and his Barelvī followers were as dramatic in their condemnation of Ismā‘īl’s intellectual and political contributions as the Deobandīs were celebratory. For Khān, Ismā‘īl and his Deobandī admirers were part of a common intellectual genealogy that thrived on cheapening the Prophet’s charisma in a misguided quest to restore divine sovereignty. Following Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī, Khān launched a scathing attack against the thought of Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers and sought to frame them as a dire threat to South Asian Islam and Muslims. In many ways then, the Deobandī-Barelvī polemics in late 19th century India represented a more ideologically defined and group centered episode of a doctrinal rivalry that Ismā‘īl and Khayrābādī had ignited a few decades earlier.

These polemical fermentations were in large measure driven by a fundamental ethical question that has captured the imagination of Sunnī Muslim thinkers for several centuries: what are the limits of innovation to the normative model of the Prophet and his Companions? In other words, when does innovation in the realms of devotional and customary practices turn into heresy, or to phrase it differently, what is the etiquette governing the application of the doctrine of heretical innovation (bid‘a) in Islam?

Bid‘a (literally innovation) is at once one of the most controversial and among the most elusive and supple categories in Muslim thought. The intellectual genealogy of bid‘a is traceable to two well-known prophetic sayings which read: “every innovation is a
misguidance and every misguidance leads to hell” and “whoever innovates in this matter of ours that which is not a part of it is rejected.” However, the modality of transgression associated with the word bid’a hardly corresponds to the sense of violation in contemporary positive law. To charge someone of committing bid’a is to accuse him of insulting the normative authority of the Prophet, of opposing the tradition of the pious ancestors, and most fundamentally, of fracturing the foundational covenant of lordship and servitude that binds a human subject with God.

The ominous symbolism attached with the term bid’a persists to this day. For example, in a recent article on the proper application of bid’a in Islam, contemporary American Muslim scholar Umar Faruq Abd-Allah remarked that “the allegation that something is bid’a is often made rashly, marginalizing new ideas and making creativity difficult. For some Muslims, the term has become a rhetorical sledgehammer to vindicate their own ideas by obliterating others.” As Abd-Allah’s commentary suggests, the dilemma over the negotiation of innovation and creativity in Islam with the imperative of upholding the sanctity of the normative order established by the example of the Prophet and his Companions is as vexatious today as it was many centuries ago. At stake in how one imagines the parameters of bid’a are the very boundaries, and by extension the very content of Islam as a discursive tradition. Indeed, the question of “when innovation turns into heresy” equates to asking what defines Islam and its limits.

12 Muḥiyuddīn al-Nawawī, Al-Arba’īn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2005), 5-7.
In this chapter, I examine some of the ways in which this crucial question was addressed by the pioneers of the Deoband School and by Shāh Muhammd Ismā‘īl before them. Since there is significant overlap in the thought of these scholars on this issue, for purposes of illustration, the bulk of this chapter focuses, though not exclusively, on the discourses of the most prolific early Deoband thinker, Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī.

Popularly known as the “physician of the community” (ḥakīm al-ummat) by his followers, Thānvī is arguably the most influential scholar in the intellectual history of Islam in modern South Asia. His writings are said to number over a thousand. He wrote extensively on almost all facets of Islam including Qur’ānic exegesis, Ḥadīth Studies, law and jurisprudence, Sufism, and philosophy. Thānvī was both an accomplished jurist and a leading Sufi in the Chishtī order. Originally from the town of Thāna Bhawan in Uttar Pradesh, Thānvī graduated from Deoband in 1883, at the age of twenty. Apart from one of Deoband’s founders Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, another major influence on Thānvī’s intellectual career was the eminent 19th century Indian Chishtī Sufi Hājī Imdādullah Muhājir Makkī (d.1899).

Hājī Imdādullah served as the Sufi guru for all of the Deoband pioneers including Gangohī, Nanautvī, and Thānvī. Though not trained as a jurist, he was arguably the most charismatic and widely followed Sufi master in colonial India. Like Thānvī, Imdādullah was also a native of Thāna Bhawan. He was accorded the title “The Meccan Migrant” (Muhājir Makkī) because he fled to Mecca in the aftermath of the 1857 mutiny after the British accused him of involvement in that rebellion. Imdādullah stayed in exile in Mecca

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for the rest of his life, where he continued to attract Indian and non-Indian disciples of varied ideological orientations. Thānvī became Imādullāh’s disciple in 1884 while he was in Mecca for his first pilgrimage. Imādullāh played a formative role in Thānvī’s development as a Sufi master. In turn, Thānvī also played a pivotal part in preserving and shaping Imādullāh’s legacy.

After graduating from Deoband in 1883, Thānvī taught for fourteen years in a seminary called Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm in the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. He then returned to his hometown of Thāna Bhawan in 1897 and took up the leadership of the Sufi lodge that his own guru Imādullāh had managed before leaving India. While at Thāna Bhawan, Thānvī trained a number of disciples and also established himself as a prolific and influential author. He remained closely connected with the Deoband School and served as its patron-in-chief (sarparast) for many years. Thānvī’s disciples came from all over India. Among the most prominent of them were his nephew Zafar Aḥmad ‘Uthmānī (d.1974) and Muftī Muḥammad Shafi’ (d.1976), both of whom went on to become major religious figures in Pakistan after the partition of 1947.15

Thānvī devoted a large part of intellectual oeuvre on the theme of heretical innovation. His writings on this concept are dispersed in varied textual genres including general reformist texts (islāhī taṣnīfāt), juridical opinions (fatāwā), and reverential aphorisms (malfūzāt) meticulously complied by his disciples. These discursive archives provide important insights into Thānvī’s social imaginary as a religious reformer and also into the contours of the Deobandī ideology more generally.

15 Ibid, 30.
In the discussion that follows, I analyze fragments of this critical yet hitherto unexplored archive. I wish to document and highlight ways in which Deoband scholars imagined the limits of innovation both theologically and in relation to religious practice. While it is well known that Deoband scholars opposed several popular conventions and devotional rituals, the question of how they went about that task has not received much attention in the Western academy. By what hermeneutical means did they try to construct the limits of normativity and heresy? How did they imagine the very idea of innovation? What are some of the ambiguities found in their conception of moral reform? These are some of the questions I will address in this chapter. As a way to launch this discussion, I want to briefly explain how I approach the categories of normativity and heresy, in relation to theorizing the concept of heretical innovation in Islam.

**Theorizing Normativity and Heresy in Islam:**

By the term “normativity”, I mean the clusters of theological commitments and patterns of embodied practices that are normatively demanded from a particular community by a group of religious experts. I prefer the category of normativity over orthodoxy\(^\text{16}\) because it affords a greater degree of fluidity and ambiguity in the location of religious authority among a set of competing claimants. The category of orthodoxy, even if assumed as subject to constant contestation, nonetheless creates the wrong impression that one can in fact generate a set of names and addresses where the custodians of orthodoxy may be

\(^{16}\) An excellent argument for dispensing with the category of orthodoxy in the study of Islam is found in Brett Wilson’s recent article “The Failure of Nomenclature: The Concept of Orthodoxy in the Study of Islam”. I concur with Wilson’s sentiment that “when a term requires explanation and qualification at every turn, as orthodoxy now does, a field must ask whether or not that term is performing the work for which it is intended…orthodoxy has become more of a stumbling block than a launching pad in our vocabulary, one which instigates more conflicts than it resolves.” (Wilson, 17).
identified and marked as such. In the absence of a dominant ecclesiastical authority in Islam, the heuristic value of the term orthodoxy seems quite questionable. Recently, scholarly attempts to reveal the inadequacy of liberal secular concepts to analyze Muslim understandings of piety and moral embodiment have produced the unfortunate effect of reifying the notion of Islamic orthodoxy. The anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s book *Politics of Piety*\(^\text{17}\) quite aptly illustrates this point.

In her book, Mahmood argued that Western feminist assumptions about human agency are deficient in understanding the agentive qualities of “illiberal” Muslim subjects, such as participants in the Women’s Mosque Movement in Egypt, the primary subject of her research. However, despite her admirably nuanced treatment of the limitations in the way human agency is conceptualized in Western liberal thought, she persists with the implicit assumption that there is such a thing as an “illiberal orthodoxy” within Islam represented by an identifiable repository of beliefs and practices that can be cultivated, internalized, and finally embodied through a careful regime of repetitive ritual performance. More importantly, the primary theater of contestation undergirding Mahmood’s inquiry puts the custodians of such an imagined illiberal orthodoxy and the protagonists of liberalism both within and outside Muslim societies against one another. According to her, these so-called illiberal expressions of Islam, especially in the arena of gender, espouse feelings of intense suspicion and at times outright contempt because they disrupt the commitment of liberally oriented Muslim scholars, secular elitists, and

Western feminists to a modern notion of individual autonomy that is neither universal nor morally absolute.\textsuperscript{18} That much is good.

But apart from Mahmood’s robust genealogical critique of Western liberal and more specifically Western feminist understandings of human agency, her conceptualization of the so-called “illiberal orthodoxy” within Islam is remarkably uniform and ungenealogized. In effect, from her book, we end up learning more about shortcomings in Western theorizations of human agency than about the spectrum of meanings and significations attached to the category of “orthodoxy” by Muslims who supposedly constitute it.

The major Muslim reformist outfits in British India, mainly the Deobandīs, Barelvīs and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth were all part of the same “orthodoxy” of learned religious elite; where they differed from one another was in their interpretation of the prophetic norm, and in effect on the normative expectations they demanded from the masses. The binary construct of orthodoxy/heterodoxy is quite unhelpful in capturing the spectrum of contesting attitudes on the borders separating the normative from the heretical. Therefore, the category of normativity, while by no means infallible, nonetheless enables greater flexibility and theoretical breathing space while analyzing scholarly debates on the boundaries of normative practice in Islam.

\textsuperscript{18} This sentiment is expressed even more directly in Mahmood’s more recent article “Secularism, Hermeneutics, Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation” \textit{Public Culture} 18 (2).
In approaching the category of normativity, I find particularly compelling anthropologist/sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus*, as developed in his two books *The Logic of Practice* and *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Bourdieu described *habitus* as “a product of history (that) produces individual and collective practices-more history-in accordance with the schemes generated by history. *Habitus* ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ (emphasis mine) of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.”\(^{19}\)

For Bourdieu, *Habitus* is a form of embodied history, which at every moment structures new experiences in accordance with the structures produced by past experiences. The relationship of *habitus* to normativity is best captured when Bourdieu writes, “the *habitus* tends to generate all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common sense’ behaviors (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be *positively sanctioned* (emphasis mine) because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate.”\(^{20}\)

Closely aligned to Bourdieu’s category of *habitus* is his concept of *doxa*; a collection of bodily rhythms and dispositions that come to be taken for granted by members of a community; an established cosmological order perceived not as arbitrary, i.e. as one among others, but as a self-evident natural order recurrently reproduced without any

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\(^{20}\) Ibid. P.55.
questioning or second guessing. Central to theorizing the category of normativity in Islam is the question of how a set of authoritative religious discourses become embodied onto a community’s practice of every-day life. In this context, particularly insightful is Bourdieu’s astute observation that “the stabler the objective structures and the more fully they reproduce themselves in the agents’ dispositions, the greater the extent of the field of doxa, of that which is taken for granted.”

I find Bourdieu’s twin concepts of habitus and doxa very helpful in deepening the conversation on the normative expectations and conflicts underlying intra-Muslim contestations over the boundaries of heresy in Islam. In a certain sense, the discourse on bid’a in Muslim thought is one driven by competing imaginaries of an ideal “Islamic habitus” or, to be more precise, a habitus informed, formed, or shaped by the Sunna. What must be emphasized here is that the Sunna is not simply a juridical category applied to derive legal rulings.

Rather, it signifies practices and rhythms of ontological activity intended to assume the status of a naturalized, spontaneous habitus-a normative model with the weight of embodied history behind it. As Bourdieu reminded us, “habitus tends to ensure its own constancy and its defense against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information, if exposed to it accidentally or by force, and especially by avoiding exposure to such information.” (emphasis mine).

21 Ibid.
The insight of defending against change is particularly relevant to the interplay of constancy and change that hovers over the *sunna-bid'a* debate in Islam. *Sunna* signifies the sanctioned normative *habitus* embodying a community that shares a history and tradition. Therefore, the community and its history and tradition, all have to be protected against the threat of external exposure and new information that might devour its purity, destabilize its constancy and in effect, compromise its normative authority as a set of discourses demanding embodied assent from its followers. *Bid'a* on the other hand is the inverse of *sunna* denoting those unsanctioned habits and rhythms of disciplined activity that are innovated against an already agreed upon structure of normativity.

Central to the definition of *bid'a* therefore is the capacity of the human subject to cultivate a parallel order of normativity that might rival God’s authority as a sovereign legislator. Indeed, it is this fundamental sin of choosing which constitutes *hairesis* (heresy); the exercise of the human will in selecting a faux architecture of normativity is what invests *bid'a* with its symbolic currency as one of the most abrasive and incendiary discourses of exclusion and taboo in Islam. So whereas in Christianity heresy usually refers to distortion of belief, in Muslim discourse it also includes unsanctioned religious practices.

To be more precise, the category of *bid'a* operates at the interstices of law and theology; the prohibition against innovating in the presence of a prophetic norm is anchored in a larger theological imaginary eager to guard the absoluteness of God’s sovereignty. For example, in arguably the most extensive work on *bid'a* in classical Muslim thought, *al-I'tisam (The Adhering)*, the renowned 14th century Mālikī jurist al-
Shāṭibī (d.1492) defined bidʿa “as an innovated practice in religion that simulates the sharīʿa (in the intensity and discipline with which it is undertaken).”\(^\text{24}\)

This quality of simulation is crucial to how bidʿa functions as a borderline discourse in Islam separating normative and heretical modes of practice that also affect one’s being as a religious agent. The boundaries of normativity are transgressed when someone chooses to establish what one might call a “faux normativity” by adhering to an unsanctioned practice simulating the rigor and passion with which one is required to adhere to the sharīʿa. Such religious adherence to a non-normative order of innovated norms sanctifies what has not been divinely sanctioned.

It is for this reason that I render bidʿa as “heretical innovation” instead of just “innovation”, as it is often translated. Rendering bidʿa as simply “innovation” is problematic because it further nourishes the stereotype that casts Islam as a religion inherently opposed to all forms of innovation and creativity in the realms of law and jurisprudence. Both the legal discourse on and the social baggage carried by the category of bidʿa are inseparably enmeshed to a psychology of unceasing rivalry between humanly invented and divinely mandated orders of normativity.

**Heresy as Faux Religion:**

The discourse on bidʿa in 19th century North Indian Muslim reformist thought was also leavened by a very similar mindset of constant rivalry between human and divine norms. For example, in their major texts on bidʿa, Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl and Ashraf ʿAli Thānvī argued that any pattern of ritualized activity (rasm) begins to threaten the

legislative authority of the divine and its expression as a normative example of the Prophet when it is performed with the same degree of passion, commitment, and discipline reserved exclusively for acts of religion such as praying and fasting that are normatively demanded of believers and that serve as means to attain greater proximity (taqarrub) to God.25

This category of rasm (pl. rusūm), derived from the Arabic roots r-s-m literally meaning to imprint, draw, or sketch a pattern, represents a critical component of Indian Muslim discourses on bid'a. In its Urdu modality, rasm can best be rendered as customs and habits that through a process of repetitive performance and reiteration become an entrenched part of a community’s underlying habitus. In other words, a rasm can be likened to a doxic condition that over time comes to be taken as a self-evident, unspoken reality, rather than as one among several alternative and equally arbitrary possibilities.

At the heart of the controversy surrounding the limits of bid‘a in South Asian Islam was the following question: under what conditions do such customary conventions (rusūm) begin to oppose or threaten the monopoly of the sharī‘a and especially that of the Prophet’s normative model as the sole body of norms operative in the realm of religious practices? In other words, at what point, if ever, do humanly innovated norms come to challenge the supremacy of divinely sanctioned norms?

Different scholars, depending on their ideological temperament, will respond to this central question in disparate ways. Moreover, it is their response to this question that holds the key to the much larger question of how they imagine their own authority as

members of the religious elite vested with the task of safeguarding the religion’s normative boundaries. Ismāʿīl and Deobandī scholars such as Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī and Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī who followed him were deeply suspicious and cautious in their attitude towards the capacity of customary practices to develop into what one might call a faux-ṣharīʿa; a counter-normativity reflective of the will of human desire rather than that of divine decree. The masses, these scholars argued, could not be trusted in matters of religion. Were a tight leash on their activities not maintained, they would be certain to compromise the primacy of the ṣharīʿa with their religious adherence to non-normative conventions.

In Islam, normatively there are two kinds of acts: obligations and permissible acts. The centerpiece of the Deobandī reform project was to protect the primacy of religious obligations against the threat of seemingly pious and spiritually rewarding rituals that are simply permissible (mubāḥ) according to the ṣharīʿa. The Deoband pioneers feared that the masses may easily confuse voluntary acts of piety as obligatory acts. For instance, Thānvī likened such voluntary rituals to tempting sweets (mithāī) that make young gullible kids salivate. While mesmerizingly pleasurable when ingested, these sweets can only harm the health of the young and earnest in the long-run.

Similarly, Thānvī analogized, just like it is the responsibility of parents to train their children and prevent them from being seduced by such delicious yet harmful sweets, Muslim scholars must also nurture the religiosity of the masses in such a manner so as to prevent them from being infected by rituals that provide immense satisfaction in this world but that can only cause pain and anguish in the afterlife.
In Thānvī’s view, bid‘a was much more dangerous than other sins. Why? Because bid‘a has the capacity to wear the mask of religion. Thānvī claimed that people who engage in heretical innovations do so with the understanding that they are taking part in pious devotional practices. This makes bid‘a different from other sins. In the case of most other sins, at least the sinner knows that he is engaging in a wrongdoing for which he must repent at some point. By contrast, the biggest tragedy about bid‘a, Thānvī lamented, was that its perpetrators are never given the opportunity to repent because they understand their heresies as acts of religion.26 Moreover, because such practices had assumed the status of religion, although a person who participated in them was lauded for his pietistic excellence, someone who refrained from them was collectively censured, reproached, and singled out as a heretic.

Indeed, the defining quality of a heretical innovation, a faux religious convention, was that the communal insistence, the peer pressure if you will, to participate in such a practice had reached a level that anyone who voluntarily abstained from it was severely ridiculed. Such conventions were kept alive and perpetuated by the invisible pressure of communal expectations and norms, not adherence to the dictates of divine law. Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s definition of rasm or convention/custom illustrates this point very well. He defined rasm as “a non-obligatory practice that becomes so deeply ritualized in a community that anyone who abandons it becomes the target of his community’s rebuke and censure. Moreover, conformity to the habits of ancestors or the peer pressure of contemporary friends, relatives, and community members represents the foundational

source of the popularity that such rituals achieve.” Therefore, a non-obligatory or simply permissible practice is performed with a dedication and regularity as if it were obligatory. But how does this happen? What is the process through which rituals become ritualized? How do individual practices become so entrenched in the life of a community that their abandonment is no longer thinkable?

**Law, History, and the Normative:**

Critical to Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl’s narrative of how non-obligatory rituals assume the aura of obligatory practices was the relationship between normativity, community, and history. All rituals, he explained, originally enter into a community’s life in order to serve particular benefits. Moreover, the intellectual elite of a community give those rituals specific forms so that those attached benefits are maximized and attained as easily as possible. Gradually, those specific forms become current and dominant among the masses. However, as those forms become an unquestioned part of a community’s everyday life, the foundational purpose or benefits for which those forms were originally instituted are forgotten.

People lose sight of the original reason underlying particular rituals, as their attachment to the current form (*ṣūrat-i murawwaja*) of those rituals intensifies. Over time, form and purpose become completely divorced. At this point, the passion of the masses remains solely invested in preserving the outer forms of rituals, even if those forms no longer yield the benefits for which they were originally put in place. Therefore, even if the purpose of the ritual could be fulfilled through other means, its current form

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28 Ibid, 93-95.
will not be discarded. And anyone who chooses not to abide by the specificities of that current form becomes subject to communal infamy.

As an illustration of his narrative, Ismā‘īl presented the example of the ritual of transmitting blessings to the deceased (īṣāl-i sawāb) by distributing food among family and community members. Almost ubiquitous among South Asian Muslims even today, this ritual is also known as the fātiḥā since participants recite the opening chapter of the Qur’ān over food for the transmission of blessings to the souls of relatives, friends, or prominent saints and scholars. The fātiḥā is usually undertaken on the third and fortieth day of a person’s death, events that are hence called siwam (the third) and chālīsvān (the fortieth) respectively. In case of famous saints and scholars, the fātiḥā is most frequently held on the occasion of their birth anniversaries. The size and scope of these events can vary from a gathering of only a few households in a neighborhood to massive crowds encompassing whole villages and towns. Despite the widespread popularity of the fātiḥā, Ismā‘īl considered this practice a heretical innovation that had been terminally corrupted by the manner and intention with which it was performed. He explained that originally, the logic of this ritual centered on feeding the destitute relatives of the deceased as an act of charity. The blessings attained from this moment of charity were then transmitted to the soul of the deceased. Since destitute relatives are the most deserving recipients of all kinds of charity in Islam, on this occasion also, they were prioritized as the foremost recipients of food, before anyone else.

However, Ismā‘īl protested, in his day Indian Muslims were so compulsively attached to this specific mode of performing the ritual that its original purpose and reasoning was lost on them. It is for this reason, he observed, that when the relatives and close friends of
the deceased are provided food, no one explicitly says things like “this food is charity on behalf of the deceased” or that “it is a source of support for the destitute.” If such statements announcing the original purpose of this practice were uttered, Ismāʿīl predicted, most relatives and family members would not even accept the food. In fact, they would consider it to be a form of insult.

Moreover, their complete intolerance for any other means of fulfilling the supposed purpose of the ritual, i.e., transmitting blessings to the deceased, confirmed that they understood this specific form as obligatory. Ismāʿīl argued that even if someone expended all kinds of charity on behalf of the deceased it would not be socially accepted. Why? People required that food be distributed exactly according to the specific way in which it was popularly distributed. If not done in this manner, the person performing the ritual will be showered with overwhelming abuse and censure. However, if that same person did not spend a dime in charity on behalf of the deceased but simply distributed food in accordance with established norms, he will be spared any verbal or emotional injury. Therefore, Ismāʿīl concluded, the practice of distributing food for the transmission of blessings to the deceased was no longer a devotional activity. It had become a mere convention divested of its original purpose and objective.

Conceptually, most important to note here is the pivotal role of history in Ismāʿīl’s narration of the formation of normativity. History, he argued, authorizes rituals in ways that make it impossible to unauthorize them. The original purpose of offering food as a means of transmitting blessings to the deceased, for instance, had become buried in time and history. Indeed, history had made this ritual normative, a taken-for-granted part of a

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
community’s life that was no longer thought about before it was done. It had become a part of what Martin Heidegger might have called its “attuned life.” By having remained within history, this ritual had become “history” itself.

According to Ismāʿīl, the original purpose of this ritual was invisible; it was hidden by history/time. Its original purpose was hidden by time because, as one might say, it had been there for some time. But how did Ismāʿīl go about demonstrating the illegitimacy of this ritual as it was currently practiced in India? By turning to history itself. Ismāʿīl’s argument rested on showing that this ritual was “brought into history” for a specific purpose that it no longer served. His historicist posture sought to make visible the contingent authorization of this ritual as a way to disrupt its unquestioned necessity. The irresolvable contradiction in this operation was this: it was through history that Ismāʿīl attempted to reveal what had been hidden by history. In trying to combat the power of normalization enabled by history, Ismāʿīl mobilized more history. Even while protesting the intimacy of normativity and history, he could not think beyond history.

For Ismāʿīl, the labor of reform required one to remind the inhabitants of the present of their responsibility to the past. What he did not consider was the unavailability of the past to make demands on the present and the precariousness of temporality that renders impossible the promise of historicizing life into a seamless thread connecting the past, present, and the future. In launching his evangelical program to transform embodied life by making appeals to history, what Ismāʿīl missed is the theorist Jean-Luc Nancy’s observation that history is not metaphysics but community or the commons. As Nancy memorably wrote “[H]istory-if we can remove this word from its metaphysical, and
therefore historical, determination-does not belong primarily to time, nor to succession, nor to causality, but to community, or to being-in-common.”

Nancy’s provocation aims to dehistoricize history. His goal is to show that the moral present of a community is not bound to how the history of its past is told. In other words, the pasts of a community are no longer transparently available for translation in the present. However, in Ismā‘īl’s historical imaginary, the past is an all important and transparent category. In his conception of the relation between normativity and history, the determination of a community’s moral life ought to be derived from an empirical history of its pasts. Ismā‘īl’s was a quest to construct and then narrate an objective history of the community. On the basis of that model he sought to reform the community.

But in the process he also objectified community. He objectified community into a group of ideologically self-aware agents who might readily shun embodied practices to demonstrate their fidelity towards the ideal history of that community. The continued prevalence of such rituals in the everyday lives of South Asian Muslims today suggests that this way of imagining the relationship between community and history is untenable. It is untenable because the promise of transforming embodied life by reminding that life of its responsibility to history is never fulfilled. This promise represents an impossibility. It remains deferred to an unspecifiable future.

An almost identical promise to transform embodied life inspired Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī’s discourses on bid’a. Thānvī was in complete agreement with Ismā‘īl’s analysis of the moral ailments afflicting Indian Muslims and with the latter’s strategies to overcome

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those ailments. Much like Ismā‘īl, he was also of the opinion that most popular rituals that seemingly fulfill devotional objectives were in fact only means to show off wealth and conform to the pressures of the community. As an illustration of this argument, he took the example of commemorating the fortieth day of someone’s death, the chalīsvān or the fortieth as it is popularly called. While ostensibly serving the purpose of collecting rewards and blessings for the soul of the deceased, he claimed, the money spent on this ceremony, primarily on the preparation and distribution of food, was solely intended for the public display of wealth and social status.\(^{32}\) In order to test the true motivation of the organizers for hosting this event, Thānvī proposed an experiment.

He suggested that the organizers of this event should be advised that rather than publically feeding members of their community (birādarī), instead they should privately give charity to someone destitute, or donate funds to a mosque or a seminary. After all, the more needy and desperate the recipients of charity, the more rewards and blessings will it bring to the deceased. If presented with this suggestion, Thānvī predicted, the inevitable reply will be something to the effect of “Good Lord! (subhān Allah) Do you really expect us to spend our money without anyone even hearing about it? How can we let that happen?”\(^{33}\) According to Thānvī, the fear of embarrassment from the community and ostentation (riyā’) were the driving motives for all these sorts of gatherings. Moreover, the resistance to adopt any means of transmitting blessings that was inhospitable to the public show of wealth confirmed this conclusion.


\(^{33}\) Ibid.
For Thānvī, this condition defeated the entire logic of transmitting rewards to the deceased. After all, he explained, the way this process works is that living people accumulate rewards by doing good deeds with the right intention, and they then transmit those accumulated rewards to the souls of the deceased. But in this situation, since the very intentionality underlying such rituals was corrupt and founded on affectation, the living were not even earning any rewards that could then be passed on. As he sarcastically put it, “when the balance (in this world) is zero (ṣifar) what is left to be gifted [to the deceased.] (jab yahān hī sifar hay tuh wahān kyā bakhsho gey.)”

Here an important point must be made: Ismā‘īl and Thānvī were not opposed to rituals such as transmitting blessings to the deceased in absolute terms. To the contrary, they considered such rituals pious acts that were laudable in essence. But what they found problematic was the intentionality with which the masses performed these rituals. The attachment of corrupt attitudes had rendered impermissible these otherwise permissible practices. And critical to Ismā‘īl’s and Thānvī’s argument was the role of history in the formation of a community’s normative boundaries.

In the view of these scholars, the moral corruption encrusted on otherwise pious rituals was invisible to the masses. This was so because the masses were so unconsciously attached to the historically generated forms of these rituals that they were blind to the original purpose of those forms. As a result, in the guise of performing pious acts, they were in fact perpetuating a public sphere plagued by moral corruptions. For Ismā‘īl and Thānvī, the work of reform involved awakening the masses to this dissonance between the normative boundaries mandated by religion and established norms that in

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34 Ibid.
their day dictated the practice of everyday life. Put differently, Ismā‘īl and Thānvī saw their role as that of interventionists who intervened in history in order to interrupt its course. They sought to transform prevailing habits by showing how those habits opposed the limits of tradition. But what kind of a legal imaginary and hermeneutical model sustained such a program of socio-religious reform? It is to this question that I now turn.

**When Innovation Becomes Heresy: The Hermeneutics of Bid’a**

For Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers, it was not only the practice and era of the Prophet (the early 7th century) that was sacrosanct. In addition, the authority of the pious ancestors, meaning all the Companions of the Prophet, their successors, and other recognized religious figures in the Sunnī tradition was equally binding and immune to any critique or impunity. Indeed, while it is convenient to translate *sunna* as the “normative model of the Prophet,” it is really the body of norms generated and sanctioned from the first three centuries of Islam (*qurūn-i salāsa*) that is usually intended when the trope of *sunna* is placed in contradistinction to its inverse other, *bid’a*. The pioneers of Deoband argued that the era of the Prophet and those of his Companions and their successors belonged to the same temporal complex.

It was impossible, they claimed, for any practice or convention current and widespread during the era of the Companions and their successors to lack either an explicit or an indicative precedent or proof-text from the Prophet’s normative example. So for instance, the development of Arabic grammar and lexicography, the establishment of the doctrine of *Qur’ān*’s inimitability, the creation of legal maxims and principles; all these

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are examples of seeming innovations that were added to the tradition after the Prophet’s physical departure from the world. But far from opposing the *sunna*, these later inventions in fact enhance its normative stature or further aid in its explication. Therefore, they cannot be called heretical innovations.

The Deoband pioneers argued that the often made distinction between the categories of commendable innovations (*bid‘a ḥasana*) and reprehensible innovations (*bid‘a sai‘yya*) was superfluous. For them, the term *bid‘a* always signified unsanctioned practices that opposed the normative model of the Prophet. The so called commendable innovations, they advised, should instead be labeled as “attachments to the *sunna*” (*mulḥaq bil-*sunna*). This was so because these later additions did not establish a new normative precedent but simply revealed an already established precedent.\(^{37}\)

According to Deoband scholars, the normative model of the Prophet constituted those beliefs, practices, and habits that were dominant during the first three centuries of Islam without objection (*shuyū‘ bi-lā nakīr*). It is not as if bad things did not happen during this exemplary stretch of time. Even then, people lied, cheated, and committed all varieties of crimes. However, these wrongdoings were both limited and subject to objection. Therefore, in the Deobandī legal imaginary, the concept of heretical innovation did not signify every new thing that did not materially exist during the first three centuries. Rather, it meant altering or opposing the logic of norms dominant during that chosen era. In a very useful discussion Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī elaborated this principle in some detail.

According to Thānvī, there were two kinds of innovations that took birth after the first three centuries of Islam’s beginnings. The first category comprised of innovations that were new in both their form and in the motivational cause (sabab-i dā’ī) for their existence. Moreover, these innovations were also necessary for the fulfillment of obligatory religious practices. For example, the writing and cataloguing of religious books, the construction of religious seminaries and Sufi lodges, the development of Arabic grammar; these were all new developments that not only did not exist during the Prophet’s life but more importantly, there was no reason for their existence at that time either.

Over time, however, these innovations became imperative for the completion of the religion’s obligations. Why? In addressing this pivotal question, Thānvī presented a story of how a general decline in the human capacity to preserve and protect religion, as that religion becomes more and more removed from its moment of origination, necessitates the emergence of new tools and inventions that might assist in that task. Thānvī argued that during the first three centuries of Islam, the capacity of that early community to protect religion from harm was so advanced and finely harnessed that there was no need for any external tools or mechanisms of assistance. For instance, the memory of the people during that era was impeccable. They remembered everything they heard. Their understanding of religion and its subtleties was so acute that they required no one to

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lecture or instruct them on such points. Similarly, a culture of recording and documenting prophetic discourses and events was also thriving.\textsuperscript{39}

After this initial era of impeccability that lasted three hundred years, Thānvī continued his narrative, a second phase set in that witnessed a steady and steep decline on a number of fronts. People were no longer as enthusiastic about preserving religion as they once were. A general attitude of indifference became the order of the day. Heretics and people who privileged rationalism over revealed truth assumed a position of dominance.\textsuperscript{40} At this moment, Muslim scholars realized that their tradition was under threat and if they failed to take immediate remedial action, religion would gradually become extinct. Therefore, they invented specific tools and mechanisms for preserving the tradition in a moment of potential crisis.

These innovations included the writing and publication of religious books, the systematization of such disciplines as jurisprudence, principles of jurisprudence, and the discourses of the Prophet. They (the intellectual elite) also constructed religious schools where these newly emerging disciplines could be taught and transmitted. Similarly, the prominent Sufis of that era invested in lodges and centers of learning to consolidate their genealogies of religious knowledge and authority.

The motivating cause that gave rise to all these developments and new activities, Thānvī emphasized, was absent in the lifetime of the Prophet and his immediate followers. All these developments might seemingly appear as innovations. However, in reality, they served as necessary preludes and preconditions to the fulfillment of

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} It appears that Thānvī here was referring to the Mu'tazilites.
obligatory religious practices. Therefore, Thānvī further explained, according to the juridical rule that a prelude to an obligation is also obligatory (muqaddimat al-wājib wājib), these innovations should in fact be called obligatory.

These new practices and forms of knowledge did not threaten the coherence of tradition. Rather to the contrary, they were necessary requirements for the continued subsistence of tradition. In other words, these seeming innovations constituted what one might call the deferred prophetic norm. Although their outer form was new, substantively, they seamlessly connected with the logic of the Prophet’s normative model. These innovations served as necessary means to materialize the deferred promise of the prophetic norm in a world in which the memory of that norm was constantly evaporating.⁴¹

On the other hand, in sharp contrast to this first category, the second category of innovations included those practices that were new in their form but not new in the “motivating cause” underlying their origination. For example, the “motivating cause” for celebrating the Prophet’s birthday is to express happiness and joy at the event of his birth. This foundational cause was also present during the Prophet’s life and the era of the Companions. Had they wished, they could also have celebrated the Prophet’s birthday. It is not as if the inauguration of this ritual was unthinkable for the Prophet and his Companions, Thānvī emphasized. Yet, they never organized nor participated in such a gathering.

For Thānvī, the absence of an act during the first three centuries of Islam even when its rationale, motivation, and reasoning were present in that era clearly showed that such an act was not authorized by the Prophet’s normative model. Put more simply, if the Prophet and his Companions did not invent a practice even when the logic for its invention was available to them, it showed that such a practice was not sanctioned by their normative model. Therefore, Thānvī continued, the later innovation of such practices was heretical because it injected into religion a kind of newness that the Prophet and his Companions did not inject even when they could have. Such innovations, Thānvī concluded, were not only new in their outward appearance but more critically, they were also new in their substance. This substantive departure from the prophetic norm was heretical because it cast a doubt on the completeness and the finality of that norm. It contradicted the prophetic norm by questioning its perfection.\(^\text{42}\)

For Thānvī, at stake in this entire debate over the limits of innovation in Islam was the sovereign authority of the prophetic norm and by extension, that of divine law. As he argued, “someone who innovates in religion is a claimant to Muhammad’s prophecy in veiled terms (dar pardah mudda ‘ī-yi nubūwwat hay). By attempting to add something new to the shari‘a, such a person implicitly accuses the shari‘a of deficiency and incompletion. Moreover, he also implicitly boasts that he has the sovereign authority to rectify the deficiencies of the shari‘a by introducing new items to it.”\(^\text{43}\) The following analogy presented by Thānvī illustrates this point even more vividly. “Say someone printed a copy of the government’s (the English word used by Thānvī) constitution and at

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī, Bid’at kī Ḥaqīqat awr us ke Aḥkām (Lāhore: Idārah-yi Islāmiyyat, 2001), 62-63.
the end of the document, he randomly added a clause of his own. Even if this additional clause were extremely beneficial for the country and its government, such unauthorized tampering with the constitution will still be called a crime and its perpetrator will be severely punished.44 “Therefore,” he continued, “if adding one unauthorized clause to the law of this world is a crime, then how can such an addition in divine law be condoned.”45

The central difference between these two kinds of innovation, Thānvī further explained, can be most clearly understood by focusing on the prophetic saying, “whoever innovates in this matter of ours that which is not a part of it is rejected (man aḥdatha fī amrinā hādhā mā laysa min-hu fa huwa radd).”46 The first variety of innovations, those that were necessary for the completion of religious obligations, corresponded to the part of this saying which reads “included in it” (min hu). To the contrary, the second category of innovations that opposed the normative tradition of the Prophet and his Companions corresponded to the segment which reads “that which is not” (mā laysa).

Another way to remember this distinction, Thānvī lectured, was to think about the difference between the expressions “innovations for religion” (iḥdāth liʾl-dīn) and “innovations in religion” (iḥdāth fiʾl-dīn).47 Innovations for religion appear new in their outward form but substantively (maʾnan) are the same as the normative model of the Prophet. On the other hand, innovations in religion are not only new in their outer appearance; they also alter the substantive logic of the Prophet’s normative model. In

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44 Ibid, 43
45 Ibid.
46 Muḥiyuddīn al-Nawawī, Al-Arbaʾīn (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2005), 5-7.
47 Thānvī, Bidʿat Kī Ḥaqqīqat, 43.
effect, while innovations for religion further solidify the Prophet’s status as the ultimate exemplar and the foundational source of normativity in Islam, innovations in religion undermine his normative authority by challenging the perfection and finality of his salvational program.

“Everything Should Stay within its Limits;” Heresy as Excess and Disorder:

Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī further described bid’ā as another name for disorder or opposition to a prescribed order of things (khilāf-i zābiṭa). For example, say while praying, instead of the prescribed four cycles, someone offered five cycles of prayer. In this scenario, because of adding on to and hence disturbing the logic of an already designated order of devotional activity, this person will have corrupted his entire prayer; he will not receive any rewards for even the first four cycles. Now this person may not find such excess heretical in any way; after all, he may argue, how can there be anything wrong with the display of some excess in the most pious act of praying. However, the central sin committed in this case, Thānvī argued, was that of opposing an already established order of normativity. Thānvī further elucidated this innate antagonism between order and excess with an insightful analogy. He said, “If someone attached a 1 rupee stamp on an envelope that only required 80 paisas48, then that envelope will become ineligible for delivery. That is so because by exceeding the designated postage rate, the sender used his stamp improperly and opposed the prescribed order of norms.”49

For Thānvī, the importance of maintaining order in the performance of everyday life was paramount even in regards to imitating the Prophet. He argued that the desire to

48 100 paisas=1 rupee.
replicate every detail of the Prophet’s personal life was commendable so long as that desire did not interrupt or undermine the fulfillment of religious obligations. The Prophet’s normative model, he further explained, consisted of two dimensions: practical (fi‘lī) and discursive (qawlī). The practical dimension was composed of the specific aspects of his daily life. For instance, the things he ate, the way he wore his turban, held his stick, kept his house, and so on. This practical dimension, in other words, constituted his personal habits. Thānvī argued that later Muslims were not obligated to replicate the specificities of the Prophet’s personal habits in their own lives. The discursive dimension of his model, on the other hand, included practices that were explicitly devotional in their import. In contrast to the practical dimension, it was obligatory to embody the limits stipulated by the discursive dimension of his model, though the human agent was provided a fair degree of autonomy to choose within those limits according to his own temperament.

Thānvī described people who went the extra mile by replicating every moment of the Prophet’s life, even when they were not obligated to do so, as “passional lovers” (‘ushshāq) of the Prophet. According to Thānvī, these passional lovers could not be emulated by ordinary people. As he put it, “love represents the foundational source for the passion to replicate every moment of prophetic life (iss kā manshā‘ muḥabbat hay)….These lovers have the capacity to choreograph their entire lives on the model of the Prophet; they eat, drink, and wear exactly as he did. But for ordinary people like us, these restrictions are not obligatory so long as we remain within the general discursive
limits of the Prophet’s normative example.”

“In all matters,” he continued, “one must vigilantly guard the limits of normativity; everything should stay within its limits (har shai’ ko apnī ḥadd par rehnā chāhīyay).”

Most importantly, Thānvī warned that one must never exaggerate in imitating the Prophet’s personal life such that the obligations of religion were compromised. In fact, an act of imitation that obstructed the fulfillment of an obligatory practice should be discarded. For instance, Thānvī explained, the Prophet used to offer eight cycles of supererogatory prayers every night. The imitation of this non-obligatory practice, if someone possessed the requisite capacity and desire, was commendable.

But imagine a scenario where a person offered supererogatory prayers all night and as a result, was unable to wake up for the obligatory prayers at dawn. In this situation, it was incumbent upon him to cast aside the voluntary prayers, to go bed early, and plan to wake up in the morning to offer the obligatory prayers at dawn. The passion to imitate every moment of the Prophet’s life was commendable so long as it did not threaten the primacy of obligatory devotional practices. When religious passion threatened obligations then that passion must be tempered or altogether extinguished. Thānvī recognized and appreciated the passionate love that overwhelms some followers of the Prophet. However, even when demonstrating one’s love for the Prophet, erotic excess that undermined order was intolerable.

50 In Muḥammad Zayd Nadvī, Fiqh-i Ḥanafī Ke Uṣūl wa Ẓawābiṭ (Karāchī: Zam Zam Publishers, 2003), 135.
Preserving the Aura of Obligations:

The foundation of Thānvī’s interpretive architecture rested on the legal principle that turning non-obligatory practices into obligations is prohibited. According to Thānvī, permissible practices (mubāḥāt) become forbidden when the masses confuse those practices for religious obligations. In fact, even if an encouraged (mustahabb) practice were elevated to the status of an obligation, it must be abandoned. Thānvī argued that this principle was a hallmark of the Ḥanafī legal tradition.

As an example, Thānvī frequently cited the influential early 19th century Ḥanafī scholar Muḥammad Amīn Ibn ‘Ābidīn who in his widely read text *Radd al-Muhtār* had categorically warned against elevating non-obligatory practices to the status of religious obligations. For instance, Ibn ‘Ābidīn noted that the recitation of the three Qur’anic chapters al-Ā’lā, al-Kāfirūn, and al-Ikhlāṣ while performing the voluntary night prayers (witr) prayers is among the prophetic practices. However, if one insisted on only reciting these three chapters and not any other chapters from the Qur’ān, then that insistence would turn an otherwise encouraged practice into a prohibition. Why? Because such a specification imparts on a non-obligatory practice the aura of obligation. Therefore, according to Ibn ‘Ābidīn, one should refrain from following any fixed pattern in how one chose parts of the Qur’ān to be recited while offering prayers.⁵²

Similarly, according to Thānvī, the Prophet’s Companions also explicitly warned against undertaking permissible and encouraged practices with a discipline that made it appear as if those practices were obligatory. In this regard, Thānvī was particularly fond

of quoting the Prophet’s Companion ‘Abdullah Ibn Mas‘ūd’s statement: “You should not give away a part of your prayer to Satan by thinking that it is necessary to turn (after finishing prayers) towards one’s right side. Indeed I have seen the Prophet often turn towards his left side also.” According to the Prophet’s normative model, turning rightwards after prayers is an encouraged (mustaḥabb) act. However, when people began to understand this act as obligatory, Mas‘ūd intervened and reminded them that there is no harm in turning leftwards either. In fact, he equated the insistence on only turning rightwards to “giving away a part of prayer to Satan.” Commenting on this report, the prominent scholar of Ḥadīth and Shāfi‘ī law Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī (d.1448) declared that “encouraged acts (mustaḥabbāt) become abominable (makrūh) if those acts are elevated above their designated status.”

The larger logic underlying these examples was that non-obligatory practices, even those that are prophetically sanctioned, must never simulate obligatory practices. This was the foundational principle, Thānvī argued, that people do not consider when they accuse Deobandī scholars of forbidding permissible practices. This charge against Deoband scholars, he emphatically insisted, was unfair. They never forbid permissible practices. Rather, they only forbid those practices that serve as a prelude to forbidden practices. Just like the means to an obligatory practice is also obligatory, the means to a forbidden practice is also forbidden (muqaddimat al-ḥarām ḥarām). The critical point to remember, Thānvī emphasized, was that at the moment when a so-called permissible

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54 Ibid.
practice becomes a means to a prohibition, it loses its membership in the category of permissible practices (*mubāḥāt*) and itself becomes a forbidden practice.\(^{55}\)

According to Thānvī, the moral value attached to a given act depended on the conditions in which that act took place. The morality of a practice was always contingent on the circumstances of its occurrence. Even a meritorious act may become undesirable were it not performed under appropriate conditions. For example, Thānvī reasoned, praying is universally acknowledged as a good act. However, even praying becomes abominable if performed when nature calls (*pāh khānā kā taqāzā ho tuh iss waqt namāz makrūh ho jātī hay*).\(^{56}\) This was the “secret,” as Thānvī put it, to why otherwise permissible practices were sometimes forbidden. “But,” he bemoaned, “this subtle point was beyond the understanding of the masses.”

Thānvī explained:

> When I forbid them (the masses) from practices like celebrating the Prophet’s birthday, they complain that I am disallowing them from participating in pious activities. I agree that these are indeed pious practices. They are not problematic in their essence. However, what renders these practices heretical is the stipulation of particular specifications as necessary for the attainment of divine rewards. To make such specifications necessary has no place in the *sharī‘a*. But what of this subtle reasoning will these masses understand? Therefore, while talking to them I do not go into the details of my argument and simply forbid them sternly from what they should not be doing. For example, once a villager protested, “Why does the Friday congregational prayer (*jum‘a*) not take place in rural areas?” I shut him up by responding, “First tell me this: why is there no *hajj* in Bombay?”\(^{57}\)


\(^{56}\) Ibid.

Thānvī was emphatic in underscoring that the decision on whether a permissible practice should be forbidden on grounds that it might lead to corruption was not available for everyone. To the contrary, only the most accomplished jurists possessed the authority to adjudicate whether the kind of corruption likely to be caused by a permissible practice was grave enough so as to necessitate its forbiddance. But how was that decision to be taken? What were the criteria in determining whether a permissible practice should be forbidden on cautionary grounds? As a way to address these critical questions, Thānvī offered his readers an interesting scenario to ponder.

This thought experiment was as follows. Suppose a practice was meritorious and good in its essence. But the public considered it taboo and blameworthy. Therefore, there was a high probability that whoever engaged in that practice will be subject to the censure of the community. In this situation, what should the law governing such a practice be? Should the jurist deem this practice permissible and ignore the controversy that participating in it will generate? Or should he call for the abandonment of this practice to avoid its potentially harmful social consequences?

Thānvī argued that this kind of a practice can neither be absolutely forbidden nor absolutely permitted. Rather than such a straightforward answer, this situation demanded a very complex engagement with the traditional sources of normativity, one that only the most accomplished jurists were qualified to undertake. Thānvī elaborated his argument

by discussing two incidents in the Prophet’s life that in his opinion best demonstrated the multiple possibilities available to a jurist when confronted with such a scenario. At stake in each of these two incidents was the ruling on a commendable act that was likely to cause a massive backlash from the community. In one of those situations, the Prophet abandoned the act so as not to cause any social unrest. In the other situation, however, he decided to complete the act despite the attached risks. The same theoretical situation yielded two very different outcomes.60

The first incident was the famous case of the wall called “ḥafīm,” to the south west of the Ka’ba in Mecca. After the Muslim conquest of Mecca in 628, the Prophet was presented with an excellent opportunity to bring this wall within the vicinity of the Ka’ba. Until that moment, this wall had been external to its territory. But this project would have required destroying the Ka’ba before re-constructing it anew. Despite the apparent goodness of this act, the Prophet decided to postpone the reconstruction plan. He reasoned that by destroying the Ka’ba, he may well offend both Muslim and non-Muslim Meccans who held the Ka’ba in great reverence. In other words the Prophet realized that given the very nascent and fragile stage in the career of Islam at that point, undertaking such a potentially provocative project would not be wise. Therefore, even though the reconstruction of the Ka’ba and the inclusion of the ḥafīm within its vicinity was the correct and sound thing to do, the Prophet chose to drop the plan because of the hostility and uproar it was likely to cause.

The second incident was the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab bint Jaḥsh (d.633) who had been divorced by Zayd Ibn Ḥarītha (d.629), the Prophet’s adopted son. After Zaynab was

60 Ibid.
divorced, the Prophet desired to marry her. However, this act was pregnant with the possibility of a scandal since it could have been perceived by the “ignorant masses” of that time as a case of the Prophet marrying his own daughter-in-law. Again, the Prophet was confronted with a moment in which a commendable act was likely to become an object of repudiation and unrest. In this situation, however, contrary to the episode of the ḥafīm, God instructed the Prophet to undertake this act, despite its likely volatile consequences. Therefore, the Prophet followed through on the commendable yet potentially controversial act of marrying Zaynab.

The dynamics of these two situations were almost identical. In both cases, the fulfillment of a commendable act would have led to the censure of the community. However, the eventual outcome in each case was antipodal. In one situation, the likelihood of controversy attached to an act was considered a good enough reason to abandon that act altogether. In the other scenario the act was not abandoned and it was fulfilled. The critical point to remember here, Thānvī instructed, was that the decision on whether a commendable act should be abandoned because of the likelihood that it would generate communal unrest could only be made by a distinguished scholar. In other words, the question of whether the apparent benefits associated with such an act should be blocked in consideration of the fissures that it may produce within a community was solely to be answered by the most accomplished of jurists.61 This was so because there was no fixed or predictable pattern of adjudication governing such situations, as the Prophet’s differing decisions in these theoretically identical situations showed. But Thānvī did not stop there.

61 Ibid.
In his typically probing style, he went one step further to speculate on why might God have allowed the Prophet to marry Zaynab while disallowing the inclusion of the ḥaṭīm within the Ka’ba? After all, these were both commendable acts that were likely to be met with the displeasure and hostility of the community. Why then the contrast in the eventual decision of allowing one act to take place and disallowing the other? In addressing these questions, Thānvī first congratulated himself for having deciphered this puzzle. “Thank God the contrast between these two scenarios has become obvious for me,” he boasted. He then argued that the vital question to be asked while deciding whether an otherwise commendable act should be disallowed on grounds that it would become an object of infamy (bad nāmī), repudiation, or scandal was whether that act fulfilled any obligatory or essential objectives of religion. If it did, then that act, regardless of the negative consequences attached to it, must not be abandoned. On the other hand, if an act were neither obligatory and nor a means to fulfill any essential objectives of religion, the prevention of scandal and repudiation should take precedence. In such a condition, that act should be abandoned.

Thānvī explained that the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab was a vital act of religious reform whilst the inclusion of the ḥaṭīm in the ka’ba was not. In that era, he historicized, the practice of marrying the divorced wife of one’s adopted son was considered illegitimate and forbidden. Furthermore, this taboo was so pervasive and deeply rooted that it could not have been remedied only through verbal admonishment. Breaking this taboo required much more than that; it demanded practical demonstration. To conduct the work of reform, it was not enough for the Prophet to just verbally preach his message. It

62 Ibid.
was necessary for him to actually demonstrate what he preached. His marriage to Zaynab represented such a moment of demonstration.

This marriage fulfilled an essential objective of religion by serving as a means for moral reform in a time of dire corruption. Therefore, according to Thānvī, the Prophet did not worry about the potential scandal his marriage to Zaynab might cause. The promise of reform attached to this act outweighed the danger of repudiation it carried. In contrast, Thānvī continued, no essential objective of religion pivoted on the inclusion of the ḥaṭīm in the ka‘ba. While a commendable act, it was by no means critical for either protecting or reforming religion. Therefore, in this situation, the high probability of the provocation and scandal that such a move was likely to cause outweighed its potential benefits, hence legitimizing its abandonment or deferral.\(^6^3\)

Thānvī presented a number of other cases from the Prophet’s career when he had not abandoned a practice despite its subversive repercussions. The quintessential example was the Prophet’s call to monotheism. His community responded to his message of radical monotheism with intense and unyielding repudiation. But that did not propel him to abandon his message. Similarly, after the Prophet returned from his ascension to heaven (mi‘rāj), his first cousin Umm Hānī, from whose house he had embarked on that journey, urged him to not announce this event to the community, lest he be charged with lying. But the Prophet refused to accept her advice because at that moment, publishing the story of his ascension was critical to advancing his prophecy. Therefore, regardless of the uproar and accusations of lying that his narration of this event was likely to cause,

\(^6^3\) Ibid.
since this act of narration fulfilled an essential objective of religion, it could not have been abandoned.\textsuperscript{64}

**Framing the Prophet:**

Thānvī’s hermeneutical framework in this discussion is quite revealing of his larger conception of reform. Most significantly, what must be noted here is that the very question of whether an act fulfilled an objective of religion or not involves an a priori demarcation of what does and does not count as religion. The juridical program that Thānvī outlined here also served the task of distinguishing activities and spheres of life that properly belonged to the category of “religion.” Thānvī’s declaration that the inclusion of the ḥafīm in the ka‘ba was something unrelated to religion, whereas the Prophet’s marriage to Zaynab or for that matter his ascension to heaven constituted deeply religious acts, was authorized through a discursive regime of separating the religious from the secular. This moment of separation was also a moment of translation; of translating the limits and boundaries of religion, of taking the sovereign decision of what can and cannot be called religion.

Secondly, in his discourse on the Prophet, Thānvī articulated a particular conception of prophetic persona and authority. According to this conception, all of the Prophet’s life was readily available for interpretation and translation. Moreover, the singular objective of that life was to either establish law or to reform religion. The Prophet’s subjectivity as a desiring human subject was not given much weight or reflection in Thānvī’s juridical estimations. For example, Thānvī never entertained the possibility that perhaps the

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
Prophet married Zaynab simply because he desired to do so, with little interest in reforming religion or in ridding society from corruption. Similarly, the Prophet’s decision to abandon the plan to include the ḥaṭīm in the ka‘ba may well have been, as Thānvī himself observed, an astute political calculation designed to prevent any fragmentation in a fledgling community, with no conscious, self-aware deliberation over whether this act fulfilled a religious objective or not.

But in Thānvī’s juridical imagination, the Prophet’s life was always translatable in religious terms. More accurately, for Thānvī, the limits of the religious and the non-religious within prophetic life were always available for discursive representation, interpretation, and translation. Under this framework, the narrative of the Prophet’s life emerges as an elaborately schematized set of discourses, actions, and gestures that can be readily mobilized for the task of demarcating the boundaries of religion. This way of imagining the Prophet’s memory was fully attuned to the ideological demand of neatly defining what does and does not count as religion. In Thānvī’s hands, the Prophet was thoroughly religionized. Simply put, Thānvī objectified the Prophet to objectify religion.

**Case Study: Ashraf ‘Ali Thānvī on the Mawlid (The Celebration of the Prophet’s Birthday)**

Arguably the most controversial and intensely contested ritual among the Muslim scholars of colonial India was the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, or what is known as the mawlid. Popularized first in Fatimid Egypt during the 11th century, today, the mawlid is widely performed in almost all Muslim communities. It takes place annually on 12th Rabī al-awwal (the third month in the Islamic calendar), the day on which the Prophet was born. Usually undertaken in the form of a festival, the specific elements of
the mawlid vary from region to region. However, the most characteristic feature of the mawlid is the recitation of panegyric poems recited in respect to the Prophet which begin with an account of his birth and then praise his life and virtues.65

The controversy over the mawlid generates passionate responses from its supporters and detractors alike. In the South Asian context, the most contested element of the mawlid is what is called the qiyām. The qiyām refers to the practice of standing up in exaltation of the Prophet to offer him salutations and to receive his blessings in return. It usually coincides with the recitation of the praise poetry. Its effectiveness hinges on the conviction that the Prophet himself appears at this gathering to bestow his blessings upon the participants. The opponents of the qiyām argue that a belief in the Prophet’s simultaneous appearance at multiple mawlid gatherings threatens to divinize the Prophet. Why? Because it risks the attachment of omniscience and omnipresence, both strictly divine attributes, to the being of the Prophet. Moreover, the act of reverentially standing up elevates the Prophet in a way that undermines his humanity.

On the other hand, as I will detail in the next chapter, the supporters of the qiyām consider it a most virtuous practice that honors God’s most exalted creation, the Prophet. Rather than a threat to divine sovereignty, they argue, the qiyām represents a physical affirmation of the Prophet’s unrivaled spiritual status. Apart from the debate about the qiyām, the question of the mawlid brings together certain pivotal theological and legal issues at the heart of the ideological rivalries between competing Muslim scholars in colonial India. For instance, these included the specification of a date (tawqit al-waqt)

for non-obligatory rituals, the danger of imitating non-Muslim religious practices
(*tashabbuh*) such as Christmas, the legitimacy of potentially carnivalesque practices like
singing and playing music, and the use of lights, incense, and perfume in embellishing
the venue where the *mawlid* was held. Apart from these communal and
phenomenological aspects, the *mawlid* also raises a critical hermeneutical problem: the
status of new practices and rituals that are neither expressly forbidden nor explicitly
sanctioned in the *Sharī‘a*. The *mawlid* is a quintessential case of a ritual that is not found
in the practice of the Prophet or his Companions but that is undertaken for the
commendable purpose of venerating the Prophet’s memory. It is empirically an
innovation. But is it heretical?

This question has remained a subject of much contestation and debate in the medieval
and early modern Islamic legal tradition. While some scholars extolled the *mawlid* as
among the most meritorious ritual practices, others expressed greater skepticism
regarding its doctrinal validity. The views of the prominent scholars Jalāl al-Dīn al-
Suyūṭī (d.1505) and Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328) on the *mawlid* capture quite well
these opposing tendencies. A leading figure in the Shāfi‘ī school of law Suyūṭī was a
staunch advocate of the *mawlid*. According to Suyūṭī, although the *mawlid* was invented
much after the Prophet and the Companions, it constituted a positive innovation that
exalted the Prophet and honored his memory. The purpose of this ritual was the
demonstration of one’s love for the Prophet and the expression of gratitude to God for
sending the Prophet to this world. Since these objectives were undeniably pious, Suyūṭī
concluded, there was no doubt about the normative validity of the *mawlid*.\(^{66}\)

Ibn Taymiyya, a prolific medieval scholar who preceded Suyūṭī by a couple of centuries, agreed with the latter that the commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday fulfilled certain pious objectives. As Ibn Taymiyya wrote, “Someone who performs the *mawlid* may deserve a great reward (*ajr* ‘azīm) because of his good intentions (*li-ḥusn qaṣdihi*) and his exaltation of the Prophet.”\(^{67}\) But although Ibn Taymiyya acknowledged the potential goodness attached to the *mawlid*, he still considered this ritual a heretical innovation. This was so because the *mawlid* lacked a precedent in the normative model of the Prophet and the Companions. Ibn Taymiyya argued that since the Prophet’s Companions—who loved and venerated him best, and were the most diligent in performing good works—did not institute a celebration for the Prophet’s birthday, clearly the *mawlid* ought not to be celebrated.\(^{68}\) Suyūṭī’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s divergent opinions on the *mawlid* provide a snapshot of the ambiguity surrounding its normative status in Islam.\(^{69}\)

The *mawlid* represents an ideal case of a ritual that might carry spiritual benefits but that lacks a precedent in the Prophet’s and his Companions’ normative example. How then should its legitimacy be determined?

Like their premodern predecessors, Muslim scholars in colonial India also contested this question with much passion. Both the supporters and critics of the *mawlid* alike expended copious amounts of ink in defending their respective positions. The pioneers of

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68 Ibid.

69 For a more thorough discussion on pre-modern Muslim legal debates on the legitimacy of the *mawlid*, see Raquel Ukeles, *Innovation or Deviation: Exploring the Boundaries of Islamic Devotional Law* Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2006, 200-239.
Deoband, as reflected in the story with which this chapter began, vigorously opposed the
*mawlid* as practiced in India. Again, it was Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī who explained the
Deobandī opposition to the *mawlid* most thoroughly, in a treatise entitled *Ṭarīqa-yi
Mawlid Sharīf* (The Normative Method of the *Mawlid*).\(^70\) In this treatise, Thānvī
presented a systematic legal argument aimed at establishing the *mawlid* as a heretical
innovation.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I conduct a close analysis of Thānvī’s legal
framework on the question of the *mawlid*. Through this analysis, I want to provide a
concrete illustration of the theoretical arguments about Deobandī views on *bid’ā*
discussed thus far. What are the specific ways in which Thānvī rationalized and called for
the illegitimacy of the *mawlid* gathering? What does his argument reveal about the way in
which he imagined the interplay of knowledge, time, and subjectivity? Through what
discursive strategies did he assemble his own authority as the gatekeeper of tradition and
its limits? These are among the questions I will address.

In the *Ṭarīqa-yi Mawlid Sharīf*, Thānvī articulated five principles governing the
legitimacy of a ritual such as the *mawlid* that is neither completely permitted nor entirely
abominable according to the *sharīʿa*, but that lacks a precedent from the normative model
of the Prophet and his Companions. Crucial to Thānvī’s hermeneutical paradigm was the
legal dictum that whenever permissible and prohibitive causes coalesce in a given act, the
prohibition always receives the preference. Let us consider each of these principles in

\(^70\) Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī, *Ṭarīqa-yi Mawlid Sharīf* (Lāhore: Idārah-yi Islāmiyyat, 1976). The content
of this treatise was originally published as part of Thānvī’s much larger work on *bid’ā* entitled
*Islaḥ al-Rusūm* (The Purification of Corrupt Conventions) first published around 1899. The
section on *mawlid* from this text was later separately published as *Ṭarīqa-yi Mawlid Sharīf*. I have
compared the original text with its later reprint and found no discrepancies or omissions.
some detail as a way to interrogate the lineaments of his legal imaginary.

Principle 1: “If a non-obligatory practice is made into an obligation, it should be abandoned.”

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the centerpiece of Thānvī’s reform project was to protect the primacy of religious obligations against the threat of non-obligatory rituals that the masses may easily confuse for obligatory acts. Despite being permissible in essence, these conventions turn into heretical innovations because they simulate the specifications exclusively reserved for obligatory religious practices. Such an epistemic transgression is confirmed, moreover, when a community begins to reproach someone who voluntarily abstains from such rituals and considers him worthy of punishment.

The mawlid, according to Thānvī, represented the ideal example of such a ritual that in its essence was not only permissible (mubāḥ) but even encouraged (mustaḥabb).

Organizing and participating in the mawlid, he argued, are spiritually beneficial acts provided the assembly were free from all known customary restraints (quyyūd-i murawwaja), both permissible (mubāḥ) and abominable (makrūḥ). For example, if certain people were to gather coincidentally without a special invitation from anyone. Or they come together for another unrelated purpose and in this gathering they either verbally or through reading the Qur’ān expressed their reverence for the Prophet by remembering his character, personal traits, miracles, and virtues in a manner consistent with the established prophetic reports; then such an assembly was permissible without any reservations.

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However, when the *mawlid* is elevated from its status as merely permissible to one that the masses begin to understand as obligatory, it turns into a heretical innovation. Moreover, if the insistence on participating in the *mawlid* reaches a level that equals or surpasses the enthusiasm with which people are summoned to perform obligatory acts, then such insistence compromises the normative authority of the *sharīʿa*. Moreover, as in the case of all simply permissible practices, the censuring of a person who willingly abstains from the *mawlid* represents the main symptom revealing such a transgression of limits. For Thānvī, when voluntarily opting out of the *mawlid* becomes a source of communal censure, there remains no doubt that the masses have come to understand it an obligation.

A trope Thānvī repeatedly invoked in this discussion was “conditionality of obligation on that which is not normatively demanded” (*iltizām mā lā yalzim*). If the insistence on engaging in a non-obligatory practice reaches a point that whoever abstains from it is subject to shame (*‘ayb*) and reproach (*ṭaʿn*), then those responsible for cultivating such a culture of insistence are guilty of innovating a counter-norm rivaling the normative order sanctioned by the prophetic example. For Thānvī, the agents of such insistence epitomized the definition of heretical innovators (*mubtadiʿūn*). Such transgressors, he declared, deserve to be punished, shunned, and rendered pariah so that they are unable to infect the religion of others in their community.

Another symptom that revealed the simulative property of the *mawlid*, according to Thānvī, was the attachment of specifications that have no source (*aṣl*) in law. For instance, the specification of a date on which the *mawlid* must be performed every year (typically the 12th day in the month of *rabiʿ al-awwal*) represents such an example of an
additional humanly invented legislation. Thānvī also adduced the following prophetic report to explicate his argument “Don’t specify Friday night as a night of staying up for prayers and other devotional exercises, and don’t designate Friday as a day of fasting.”

Principle 2:

“Every permissible and even encouraged (mustaḥabb) act becomes impermissible and forbidden if it is polluted and mixed with an illegitimate act or condition.”

This principle is best illustrated with the following example furnished by Thānvī, “accepting an invitation to a gathering is encouraged and in fact sanctioned by prophetic reports. However, if an illegitimate activity takes place at this gathering, then going to it will also be deemed impermissible.” This criterion reflects Thānvī’s concern with maintaining the purity of religious practices in their most pristine forms. Moreover, it is also revealing of the pathology centered social imaginary that drove his method of adjudicating the legitimacy of contested devotional practices such as the mawlid. For Thānvī, the normative thrust of religion was like the human body which must be protected from all forms of corrupting and polluting influences. Therefore, even if an otherwise pious activity such as commemorating the Prophet’s birthday becomes infected by external corruptions, it must be abandoned lest it harm the community as a whole.

Some of the corruptions that Thānvī cited are quite illustrative of how he imagined a moral public:

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73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, 48.
- Boys with good looks or good voices (khush alḥān) sing panegyric tunes during the ceremony.

- Participants wear inappropriate and impermissible clothes.

- Music and singing at the gathering produces the possibility of sexual attraction, such as when a good looking man or woman sings.

- The expenditure on decorating the venue, putting up lights and other embellishments is too exorbitant.

- The venue is fragranced with excessive amounts of perfume and incense.

- It is considered obligatory to distribute sweets to the participants.

- The enthusiasm displayed in bringing people together is highly exaggerated, to the extent that such efforts exceed the care taken to gather people for obligatory prayers and preaching ceremonies.

- The Prophet is understood as omniscient (ḥāzir) and omnipresent (nāẓir) at the gathering.

- The organizer’s intention is that of indulging in vanity and pride.⁷⁵

The two central moral principles that underpinned Thānvī’s litany of corruptive influences were simplicity and sobriety. Indeed, simplicity and sobriety were among the most decisive normative values undergirding the Deobandī ideology. The pioneers of Deoband including Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī, and Thānvī

were united in their condemnation of all forms of devotional practices that might ignite unwarranted passion and desire among its practitioners. Their disgust for the kinds of beliefs, habits, and conventions listed above from Thānvī’s discourse on the mawlid was rooted in a social imaginary that saw any departure from the twin ideals of simplicity and sobriety as inherently subversive to the normative stability of Islam. It was founded on the conviction that a moral economy tolerant of excess and elitism fundamentally injures the capacity of the masses to distinguish between sanctioned normativity and innovated heresy.

Consistent with the larger Deobandī narrative of reform, Thānvī’s legal apparatus in the Ẓarīqa-yi Mawlid Sharīf also argued for a political economy of piety whereby a subject committed to simplicity and sobriety enabled a community where wastefulness, public displays of pomposity, and erotic modes of being generated taboo and shame rather than pride and glory. Therefore, it is inaccurate to understand projects of reformist sobriety, such Thānvī’s, as a push for a retreat to a “private sphere” concerned exclusively with the cultivation of pious subjects. To the contrary, the very hallmark of Thānvī’s discourse on bid‘a was the way it connected the moral architecture of the self to the political economy of the community. His discourse defied any distinction between private and public spheres. I return to this point in the conclusion of this chapter.

76 Here I am referring to Thānvī’s concern that practices such as putting up lights, using excessive decorations, the inter-mingling of men and women, and the singing of good looking boys ingrain into a community an eros that inherently opposes the cultivation of a sober subject, and by extension the nurturing of a community committed to the idea of sobriety in its everyday practice.
Principle 3:

“It is the responsibility of the religious elite to shepherd and protect the religion and conscience of the masses.”

Thānvī argued that religious scholars, because of their capacity to attract the imitation of the masses, must exhibit extreme caution and care while publicly performing their religion. In Thānvī’s view, it was the responsibility of the religious elite to nurture and protect the moral health of their communities. Therefore, if there was ever a danger that the masses have begun to understand a simply permissible practice as obligatory, it was incumbent upon the religious elite to also abandon that practice. As moral exemplars, religious scholars were required to remain mindful of how their actions influence the actions of people in their communities. Thānvī admitted that religious scholars, due to their extensive knowledge and experience, have a superior capacity to distinguish between obligatory and non-obligatory practices. However, in order to protect the religion of the masses, the religious elite should still jettison otherwise beneficial practices that the masses may confuse for obligations. The foremost duty of religious scholars, Thānvī emphasized, was to save the masses from being harmed by doctrinal and moral corruptions.

Thānvī explained his argument by drawing on and elaborating the two categories of individual harm (zarar-i lāzmī) and extensive harm (zarar-i muta’addī). Individual harm, he explained, involves a situation in which only the actor himself is negatively impacted by engaging in a harmful act. Extensive harm, on the other hand, takes place when others are also affected by his actions. Thānvī argued that just as a permissible act becomes

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77 Thānvī, 48.
compulsory to forbid when it implies individual harm, in the same way, an act must also be prohibited from the viewpoint of blocking an extensive harm. For example, “say someone was ill and the doctor allowed him to break his fast. In this situation, his eating and drinking are permissible in essence. However, if there were a probability that another person will look at this condition and break his fast too, then this seemingly permissible action (the breaking of one’s fast in times of sickness) will also become impermissible.”

Therefore, the elite must constantly monitor non-obligatory practices that hold the potential of confusing the normative boundaries separating simply permissible and divinely mandated acts, and that thus cause either individual or extensive harm. Moreover, the elite should also enforce the abandonment of a practice that at any point threatens to become elevated above its normatively designated status. As an example, Thānvī noted that the act of seeing the family of the bereaved on the day of death used to be among the prophetic practices. However, when people began understanding this ritual as an obligatory act, the elite declared it as prohibited and worthy of abandonment. Similarly, the practice of prostrating before God as a gesture of exhibiting gratefulness was customary and permissible at the time of the Prophet, but since people started understanding it as a form of emphasized prophetic practice (sunnat-i maqṣūda), it was declared prohibited.

There is, however, one major addendum to this rule that Thānvī stipulated; if a legally obligated practice becomes corrupted by certain abominable features, then instead of abandoning that practice altogether, it should simply be corrected and purified of the attached corruptions. For example, Thānvī explained, were a funeral cortege (janāza) 78

78 Ibid, 57.
accompanied by a woman who is crying excessively (*noha*), then instead of abandoning the burying ceremony altogether, such women should just be silenced. In the case of a necessary practice, therefore, a temporary abomination cannot result in its abandonment. On the other hand, with regards to an unnecessary or a non-obligatory act such as accepting an invitation to a gathering, the invitation itself should be turned down if the gathering contained any abominable or corrupt qualities.\(^7^9\) This according to Thānvī was the crucial difference in the rules pertaining to simply permissible and obligatory acts.

But apart from its hermeneutical legal aspects, this discussion is also quite revealing of Thānvī’s self-imagery as a member of the learned elite vis-à-vis the masses. In his social imaginary, the religious elite were perpetually burdened with the responsibility of serving as exemplary models of imitation. It is through the demonstration of the elite that the masses cultivate and perform their religion. If the elite acted irresponsibly in their demonstration, they will influence the religion of the masses in a detrimental fashion. And were they to take their capacity to attract the imitation of the masses seriously, they will contribute to the cultivation of a more religiously sound and healthy community.

In this context, a rhetorical device employed frequently by Thānvī and several other Indian Muslim reformers (both Deobandīs and Barelvīs) is that of equating the masses to a herd of cattle (*al-‘awāmm ka-l-an ām*). Under this construction, the masses are like unsophisticated and gullible cattle in constant need of a class of shepherds to provide them with religious guidance and moral direction. There is a certain irony in this configuration because the kind of discourse that jurists like Thānvī invariably engaged in tended to be highly-pedantic, linguistically-challenging, and specialized. One wonders

\(^7^9\) Ibid, 49.
then just how accessible such discourses and the hermeneutical specificities contained in them really were to the “cattle-like” masses they sought to reform and morally purify. Indeed, perhaps more than anything else the symbolism of al-‘awāmm ka-l-an’ām serves to scaffold the religious authority of the scholars who invoke it. By juxtaposing the relationship between the religious elite and the masses with the imagery evoked by the interaction of a shepherd with his herd, this aphorism interlocks the discursive authority of the former to the imposed mimetic predispositions and commitments of the latter.

Principle 4:

“Spatial, temporal, and empirical observations can produce different outcomes in matters that are designated as temporarily abominable (makrūh-yī ārzī).”

As mentioned earlier, several prominent medieval and early modern Muslim jurists such as al-Suyūṭī (d.1505) among many others had commended the mawlid as an undeniably legitimate and exemplary ritual. This fact created a rhetorical and normative challenge for Thānvī since his opposition to the mawlid could well have been taken as an affront to the intellectual integrity of these earlier luminaries. Thānvī’s articulation of this principle was meant to confront this challenge. In a moment of interpretive determinism, Thānvī argued that these earlier scholars had called the mawlid a commendable act because during their lifetime, it was not polluted by the moral corruptions that were later added to it. As Thānvī wrote, “had these jurists been adjudicating on the mawlid today, they would also deem it forbidden.” Therefore, according to Thānvī, the value attached to a practice does not have to be constant or permanent across time and space. It is

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80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
possible that an action currently categorized as abominable may well have been regarded as permissible in a previous era.

Thānvī applied the same line of reasoning to spatial differences; an act considered permitted in one country (based on its prevalent internal conditions) may well be deemed impermissible in another. Similarly, two equally accomplished jurists may arrive at opposite legal opinions on the same matter because of different experiential and observational knowledge sets. Thānvī reasoned that if a jurist were unaware of the moral corruptions attached to an otherwise permissible practice, he would obviously not find it problematic. On the other hand, however, the experience and observation of another scholar may persuade him that a practice leads to abominable behavior. Therefore, he will declare that same practice to be impermissible.

According to Thānvī, this seeming opposition “was only on the level of appearance and not that of reality. It was merely superficial (ṣuwarī) not meaningful (maʿnawi).”

Therefore, Thānvī succeeded in holding on to his prohibitory stance on the mawlid while also affirming his loyalty to prominent medieval jurists such as al-Suyūṭī, who may have held a different legal opinion than him.

Thānvī’s hermeneutical program was grounded in a morally relativistic framework. According to this framework, the moral value of an act was contingent on the conditions under which that act took place. Moreover, the moral relativism of Thānvī’s hermeneutic magnified his own authority as a reformer jurist. This was so because ultimately the decision on the morality of a practice in a given moment and place rested with him.

82 Ibid.
Thānvī imagined his role as that of a reformer who exercised his own will in order to approximate divine will. In performing the work of reform, he sought to curate a moral order that replicated the normative expectations and boundaries of divine law.

Furthermore, the moral relativism found in Thanvi’s thought was intimately connected to a palpably ambiguous understanding of time and its relationship to the formation of a community’s norms. On the one hand, Thānvī’s legal apparatus was anchored in a dynamic imagination of temporality. According to this dynamic imagination, the normative rulings on contested ritual practices do and in fact should change according to shifting temporalities and social conditions. Law in this case is projected as a flexible discursive space that adapts according to the temporal conditions under which it operates. On the other hand, however, the very desire to imprint the normative model of the Prophet on the *habitus* of Muslims in all temporalities and geographies at the heart of Thānvī’s discourse on *bid’a* presumed a markedly linear and non-dynamic conception of time.

Thānvī sought to strategically control the constancy or dynamicity of time in his discourse according to the kind of argument he wished to make. For instance, while clarifying his argument about the necessity of adopting legal opinions according to the external contingencies found in particular temporal moments, Thānvī presented the following example, “In the Prophet’s time, women were allowed to pray in mosques because the possibility of attraction between the two sexes was not there. Later on,
however, on observing the changed conditions, the Companions declared this practice censurable.

On the one hand, in this example, the original context of the Prophet’s time serves as the master temporal framework to which the present always harkens and responds. The model of temporality underpinning such a sentiment is animated by what one might call an oracular mode of history where life in the modern world is always responding to an oracle (the prophetic example) from the 7th century.

This oracular imaginary of history is by its nature hostile to change and dynamism; constancy is a necessary quality for its survival. However, the flexibility of changing legal opinions according to contemporaneous social conditions, (as reflected in the alteration to the ruling concerning the presence of women inside mosques enacted by the Companions), valorizes the present as the temporal context most relevant to the fashioning of a community’s normative ethical program. While the latter attitude is anchored by the dynamicity of time, the former necessitates and is nourished by its constancy.

There is another ambiguity marking Thānvī’s example here: on what historical grounds must one accept these radical shifts in human nature over time? For instance, on what basis can Thānvī argue that the possibility of attraction between the two sexes inside mosques was absent during the time of the Prophet only to emerge after his death? Thānvī did not address these ambiguities. However, the critical question here is not whether his argument was coherent but what conception of history it articulated.

\[83\] Ibid, 50.
One may respond to this question by observing that the rise and fall narrative of Muslim morality contained in Thānvī ’s discourse was tethered to the conviction that the further one recedes in history, the more pristine form of Islam will one find, with the Prophet’s era serving as the ultimate model of an uncorrupted moral economy. Moreover, Thānvī’s negative valuation of time in the present also served to authenticate his own religious authority as a custodian of the tradition’s moral purity. A morose diagnosis of the present accentuates the need for and the authority of prophetic reformers who can reorient the religion of the masses from the path of heresy to that of normativity. In fact, Thānvī’s entire project of conducting a strict epistemological control over religious obligations ceases to hold much weight were it not ensconced in a narrative of pandemic moral failure.

To be more precise, Thānvī weaved his religious authority by placing in contradistinction a utopic imagination of the past with a dystopic coloring of the present and the future. The utopia (the era of the Prophet and his Companions) in Thānvī’s discourse was behind us; it was a figment of history that could only be retrieved through a comprehensive and on-going program of transforming a community’s habitus such that it may re-enact the absent memory of the past in the present. But that promise of retrieval remains unfulfilled. It remains an impossibility deferred to the future.

Here one should add that it is precisely this always deferred promise of renacting the prophetic past in the present that fuels the apocalyptic urgency of moral crisis found in the popular Muslim reformist trope of fasād al-zamān (corruption of time); a trope Thānvī recurrently invoked in his discourse on bid’ā. The symbol of zamān (time) in this construction represents a metonymical substitution for people, the masses, who cultivate
habits and practices that cause an exponential rise in the index of corruption during each successive epoch. Moreover, it is in the irresolvable aporia enabled by the simultaneity of utopic and dystopic temporalities in Thānvī’s discourse that his religious authority as a watchdog and reviver of the prophetic norm was enshrined.

Principle 5:

“An unlawful act cannot be permitted on the basis that it produces certain benefits and welfare for the community. If those attached benefits are not necessary according to the Shari‘a, then that act will remain unlawful.”

In the articulating this principle, Thānvī was responding to the argument propounded by the defenders of the mawlid that the beneficial outcomes of this ritual such as the physical nourishment of the poor, the propagation of Islam among non-Muslims, and the flowering of a religious community etc., justifies its legitimacy. Thānvī counter argued that the communal benefits generated by the mawlid cannot offset the harmful effects of the corruptions attached to it. Moreover, according to Thānvī, if the supposed benefits associated with the mawlid were not legally obligatory or if there were other means to achieve them, then those benefits cannot legitimate the mawlid.

In effect, Thānvī debunked the idea that the mawlid could be legitimized on account of the fact that it enabled an enchanted universe and a shared sense of community for its participants. In Thānvī’s social imaginary, guarding the normative boundaries of the shari‘a represented a much more pressing, urgent, and worthwhile imperative than the cultivation of an enchanted universe. Maintaining the integrity of divine law took

84 Ibid.
precedence over all other objectives. As he commented, “from good intentions a permissible act might assume the status of a devotional practice (‘ibāda) but an abominable act (makrūh) can never become permissible, even if the latter contained a thousand benefits and profitable consequences.”\textsuperscript{85} He further elaborated, “Say someone engaged in injustice and coercion to collect money with the intention of distributing it to the poor. In this situation, injustice and coercion will not become permissible even if millions of people were expected to benefit from this apparent act of generosity.”\textsuperscript{86}

\textbf{Giving Meaning to a Profane Reality: Thānvī as the Mediator of Divine Goodness}

After outlining his five principles, Thānvī tested the legitimacy of the \textit{mawlid} according to those principles. Thānvī argued that first one must determine whether the masses understood taking part in the \textit{mawlid} as obligatory. Second, one must ascertain if the \textit{mawlid}, as performed by Indian Muslims, had been corrupted by any polluting influences. With respect to the \textit{mawlid}, on both of these counts, Thānvī decisively answered in the affirmative. As he wrote:

What must be ascertained is whether such permissible actions are producing harm in our time: if one finds harm being generated then these acts must be forbidden. Otherwise, they will remain permitted. And this ascertainment can be easily derived through observation and experience. So in the case of the \textit{mawlid}, through my years of experience with this matter, I can unhesitatingly declare that nearly everyone among the masses considers this ceremony as legally obligated, and partakes in its festivities as if it were equal to or even higher in stature than the obligations of the \textit{sharī’a}. \textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 51-52.
Thānvī did not outlaw the *mawlid* in absolute terms. However, he severely restricted the scope of its permissibility. According to him, if participants at this gathering can demonstrate, both through their words and actions that they consider the *mawlid* a non-obligatory ritual, it will remain permitted. The way they can do so, Thānvī suggested, is by adding some variety to the specifications attached to the ceremony; specifications that otherwise simulate the *sharī‘a* in the intensity with which they are adhered to.

As Thānvī elaborated:

If distributing sweets is a regular part of the ceremony, then on certain occasions the participants should mix it up a little and say give out cash or clothes or wheat to the poor in private. Yet some other times they should completely abstain from any form of philanthropy. Similarly, when the virtues and personal traits of the Prophet are being announced during the ceremony, if one were gripped by passion and ecstasy and as a result stood up, there is no reason to fix a specific time for that standing up to take place. One should stand up whenever one feels dominated by ecstasy, whether that happens in the beginning, middle, or the end of the ceremony. Yet at other times, one should also control one’s passion and keep sitting. Moreover, one must not specify the *mawlid* ceremony as the only venue where one stands up when overcome by ecstasy. One should also experience this ecstasy and stand up in venues other than the *mawlid* when the virtues and traits of the Prophet are recited.\(^{88}\)

Thānvī was quick to point out however that it is almost impossible to find a person who met all these requirements, i.e., someone who did not confuse the *mawlid* for an obligatory practice in the way he performed this ritual. As he sarcastically commented, “This kind of a person is as rare as a phoenix.”\(^{89}\)

\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.
Thānvī’s interpretive methodology rested on a highly relativistic mode of ethics. For Thānvī, it was the external contingencies (‘awāriz-i khārijīyya) under which an act takes place that determined its legitimacy. This hermeneutical posture, like any, was inextricably tied to the variable of religious authority. By shifting the debate from the inherent and essential merit of an act to the conditions under which it took place, Thānvī bolstered his legislative authority as a jurist. This was so because ultimately it was he who decided whether a given set of external contingencies were negative or positive, corruptive or salutary.

In their book *Justice Miscarried: Ethics, Aesthetics and the Law*, Costas Douzinas and Ronnie Warrington argued that the gradual expansion in the legislative power of the human will represents the most characteristic feature of the development of law in modernity. Under conditions of modernity, they wrote, “modern conscience and free will become legislative: the subject can now examine the rules themselves and can reject and replace them if they do not fulfill criteria that may vary according to circumstance and belief.” Similarly, in the ʿTarīqa-yi Mawlid Sharīf, Thānvī articulated specific juridical criteria that ground moral obligation in a highly systematic process of ratiocination meditated through the prism of human reason. By deeming the normative value of practices that are neither expressly sanctioned nor definitively prohibited by divine law as dependent upon external contingencies, Thānvī elevated his own authority as a master-jurist (*mujtahid*). While acting as the mediator of divine will and intent, Thānvī positioned himself as the bestower of meaning upon a profane reality.

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Conclusion:

To conclude, in this chapter, I have shown that central to the programmatic of normativity undergirding Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl’s and Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī’s discourses on bidʿa was a desired synchronicity between the epistemic boundaries established by the sharīʿa and the ontological patterns governing everyday habits and practices. In their view, an act turned into heresy when it transgressed its normatively assigned value of allowed (ḥalāl), permissible (mubāḥ), mandatory (wājib), abominable (makrūh) and forbidden (harām) as delineated according to a given interpretation of the sharīʿa. In other words, the normative values of the sharīʿa functioned as a panoptic apparatus of knowledge to which the rhythms of individual habits and practices must correspond and harmonize. When this harmony between knowledge of the law and acquired dispositions is rattled, heresy ensues. Epistemic chaos leads to ontological and social disorder. It is useful to observe here that this knowledge-practice complex was also at the centerpiece of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, as Michel De Certeau has keenly observed.

De Certeau argued that the key variable connecting the objective structures of a community to its habitus, in Bourdieu’s model, was that of acquired learning. According to De Certeau, Bourdieu’s theory “seeks to explain the adequation of practices to structures through their genesis. This “genesis” implies an interiorization of structures (through learning) and an exteriorization of achievements (what Bourdieu calls the habitus) in practices. A temporal dimension is thus introduced: practices (expressing the experience) correspond adequately to situations (manifesting the structure) if, and only if,
the structure remains stable (emphasis mine) for the duration of the process of interiorization/exteriorization.”

A very similar configuration of correspondence between structures and dispositions can be found in Muslim reformist discourses invested in protecting the primacy of the *sharī‘a* as a sovereign structure of normative commands. The stability of the epistemic checkpoints and boundaries stipulated by the *sharī‘a* can only be ensured through the exteriorization of acquired dispositions that publically enact and affirm those checkpoints and boundaries. However, these boundaries and limits are never a settled matter. The power struggle over whose version of “normative dispositions” come to dominate the *habitus* of a community is always an ongoing process; a process that is ever susceptible to ceaseless contestation. In other words, the very contestability of an idealized *doxa* indicates its absence; for in the presence of a *doxa*, even the possibility of any alternative choices becomes unthinkable and eviscerated from the realm of consciousness. It is this struggle over competing *doxas*, I would argue, that serves as the master narrative-plot underlying the saga of intra-Muslim contestations over the meaning and scope of *bid‘a*.

The analysis conducted in this chapter also calls into question historian Barbara Metcalf’s assertion that the Deoband pioneers articulated a project of religious reform focused on the private sphere of personal piety. In her pioneering book on the early years of the Deoband Madrasa, Metcalf argued that the Deobandi ideology was characterized by what she called an “inward turn,” by which she meant a renewed emphasis on reforming the individual as a believer. In her own words, the Deoband scholars “fostered

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a kind of turning away from issues of the organization of state and society, toward a concern with the moral qualities of individual Muslims.”

In his more recent study on Deoband, Qasim Zaman critiqued Metcalf’s argument by noting that it cannot explain “the public and political dimension of the activities of Deobandi ‘Ulama’ in the twentieth century” and nor does it “prepare one for the radical sectarianism in Pakistan in the last quarter of the twentieth century.” Zaman’s point is well taken. But here I should like to add that Metcalf’s argument suffers from a more elemental flaw, namely its assumption that the public and the private spheres can be readily distinguished as separate domains of life. Metcalf’s conceptual frame imposes liberal secular binaries such as inner/outer, public/private on actors who did not live their lives or organize their ideas of reform under the limits of such binaries.

As I have shown in this chapter, Deobandī discourses on *bid’a* operated at the nexus of law, theology, and everyday practice. A subject’s salvational prospects intimately depended on the curation of a public sphere that affirmed a political theology of radical and absolute divine sovereignty. The purification of the individual believer required the cultivation of a society committed to embodying the limits of divine law in the performance of everyday life. The defining feature of the Deoband reform project was not the interiorization of Islam or “turning away from issues of the organization of society,” as Metcalf had argued. To the contrary, the Deoband pioneers strived to transform society in a way that restored the primacy of divine sovereignty in the religious

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imagination of Indian Muslims. The task of reforming the self was inseparable from the imperative of reorganizing society. In conceptualizing the religious thought of Deoband scholars, it is impossible to make such distinctions as personal piety/public religion, subject/society, interior/exterior, or belief/practice. These divisions seek to canonize native imaginaries of tradition and its limits that are not available for disciplinary canonization.

In the next chapter, I describe a competing understanding of tradition and reform by examining Deoband’s arch-rival Aḥmad Razā Khān’s scathing critique of the Deobandī ideology, especially on the question of heretical innovation. Khān sought to unauthorize the credibility of the Deoband pioneers as reliable custodians of the Prophet’s memory. Moreover, he tried to puncture the coherence of their reform project by casting it as a heretical innovation that opposed the opinion of prior and existing authorities of the tradition. It is to an elucidation of how Khān framed his Deoband rivals as incredible heretics who posed a looming threat to Islam in India that I now turn.
Chapter 3

Retaining Goodness: Reform as the Preservation of Original Forms

In January 1906, while in Arabia for his second pilgrimage, Aḥmad Razā Khān presented a juridical opinion (fatwā) to 33 leading jurists in Mecca and Medina. In this juridical opinion, he had anathematized some prominent Indian Muslim scholars. Khān urged his Arabian interlocutors to endorse his judgment of anathema. He played the role of a troubled informant educating his foreign colleagues on the different brands of “heretics” and “unbelievers” that in his opinion were thriving in India at that time. As Khān wrote, addressing his Arabian interlocutors:

Tell me clearly if you agree with my assessment of these leaders of misguidance. Do you agree with my judgment of anathema? Or should we refrain from calling them unbelievers just because they are so called scholars (‘ulamā’) and Maulvīs, even though they are Wahhābis who curse at God and the Prophet? Should we not save the masses from these people who deny the necessities of religion, and who proudly publish and spread their contemptuous ideas?¹

Apart from the founder of the Aḥmadī movement Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d.1908), these ‘leaders of misguidance,’ as Khān called them, also included the pioneers of Deoband; Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, Qāsim Nānautvī, and their immediate successors, Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī and Ashraf ʿAlī Thanvī. This juridical opinion, composed in Arabic, was later published under the title The Sword of the Holy Sanctuaries² at the Throat of Unbelief and Falsehood (Ḥusām al-Haramayn ‘alā Manhar al-Kufr wa-l-Mayn). Khān succeeded in acquiring endorsements from his counterparts in Mecca and Medina. In his

² This of course was a reference to Mecca and Medina, the two most sacred cities in the Islāmic tradition.
opinion, these endorsements, issued by scholars from the bastion of Sunnī Islam, had made official the defeat of his Deoband rivals. More seriously, it had also authorized their exit from the fold of Islam. This was an unprecedented event in Muslim South Asia.

There was nothing new about the eruption of fierce polemics and debates among the Indian Muslim scholarly elite. However, by anathematizing prominent fellow Ḥanafī scholars, Khān had set a novel precedent. His judgment of anathema on Deoband scholars represented a culmination of two decades of polemical activity between the pioneers of these two schools. This fury of contestation was facilitated by the technological possibilities of a new colonial public sphere in which the publication and dissemination of printed materials had become easier than ever.

Deobandī and Barelvī scholars alike pummeled each other with stinging refutations and counter refutations. Two texts in particular entitled *Glistening Lights* (*Anwār Sāṭi‘a*) and *Conclusive Proofs on the Darkness of Glistening Lights* (*al-Barāhīn al-Qāṭi‘a ‘alā Zalām al-Anwār al-Sāṭi‘a*) represent canonical examples of this back and forth contestation. *Glistening Lights* was composed by a scholar from the North Indian town of Rāmpūr, ‘Abdul Samī‘. In this text, published in 1886, Samī‘ undertook a devastating critique of Deobandī positions on various questions of theology and ritual practice, mostly focusing on the issues of prophetic knowledge, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, and the transmission of blessings to the deceased. Curiously, Samī‘ was not a disciple of Aḥmad Razā Khān, though their views almost entirely overlapped. But his work was implicated in Deobandī-Barelvī polemics after Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī, Gangohī’s foremost disciple, responded to *Glistening Lights* two years later in 1888 in a
point by point rejoinder that he appropriately titled *Conclusive Proofs on the Darkness of Glistening Lights*.

Aḥmad Razā Khān himself also contributed prolifically to this industry of polemics. Moreover, he was not to be outshined in the department of menacing titles. Indeed, the titles that Khān chose for his polemical texts against Deoband scholars and Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl are quite illustrative of his passionate disdain towards them:


As some of these titles and the passage quoted above suggests, Khān strategically attempted to brand his Deoband opponents as “Indian Wahhābis.” Despite their purported loyalty to the Ḥanafi tradition, Khān claimed, Deoband scholars were actively assaulting the normative practices and beliefs sanctioned by that tradition, in the same vein as the 18th century Arab reformer Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Khān’s accusation is undermined by the fact that neither the pioneers of Deoband nor Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl before them had any connections with the *Wahhābī* movement or ideology in Arabia.

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Moreover, Deoband scholars were adamantly opposed to the non-conformist Ahl-i Ḥadīth School in India who could in theory be the closest resemblance to the Wahhabis. In fact, Deobandī hostility towards non-conformists (ghayr muqallidīn) was often much more dramatic in comparison to their opposition against the Barelvīs. According to the Deobandī imaginary, the Barelvīs, despite their penchant for heretical rituals and conventions, and their tendency to divinize the Prophet, were nonetheless part of the same tradition of Ḥanafī scholarship and learning. The Barelvīs at least honored the authority of the same texts and personalities as the Deobandīs. While their interpretations differed, the interpretive canvass was still the same. That was not the case with the Ahl-i Ḥadīth who rejected the very legitimacy of that canvass by denying the canonical authority of the four Sunnī schools of law.

Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī summed up the distinction between Barelvīs and Ahl-i Ḥadīth, as seen from the Deobandī perspective, with an illuminating pair of comparisons. He wrote, “The Barelvīs are like members of one’s own household who have gone awry. The Ahl-i Ḥadīth and non-conformists, in contrast, were never part of the household to begin with….The Barelvīs have etiquette but no faith (be-dīn bā-adab). The Ahl-i Ḥadīth, on the other hand, have faith but no etiquette (bā-dīn be-adab).”

In any case, Khān’s insistence on attaching the label of “Wahhbī” on his Deoband opponents reflects the monstrous symbolism that had come to be associated with this term by the late 19th and early 20th century, in both India and Arabia. Ideological battles between Ḥanafī scholars and their non-conformist antagonists had been raging in the

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Ḥijāz since the late 18th century. These battles provided Khān with an ideal moment to authorize his own normative agenda in centrally visible ways. Indeed, it was a specific conjuncture in which specific institutional, political, and material conditions conjoined to allow Aḥmad Razā Khān to come into central view and authoritatively argue for the exclusion of Deoband scholars from Islam in Ḥusām al-Ḥarāmayn. For following the establishment of the Saudi Kingdom in 1932, no such juridical pronouncements endorsing Khān’s understanding of tradition and difference have been forthcoming.

Why precisely did Khān anathematize the pioneers of Deoband? What was at stake for him in this polemic? How did Deoband scholars defend themselves from Khān’s accusation of anathema? And most fundamentally, what were the pivotal intellectual disagreements that separated Barelvī and Deobandī imaginaries of tradition and its limits? These are among the questions addressed in this and the following chapters. I will address these questions by focusing on two central objectives: 1) highlighting the major ways in which Khān’s conception of heretical innovation contrasted with that of his Deobandī rivals, and 2) presenting their opposing views on the relationship between knowledge, sovereignty, and prophetic authority. I will pursue this second task in the next chapter through a close examination of a debate over the Prophet’s capacity for knowledge of the unknown (‘ilm al-ghayb) that represented the immediate context for Khān’s judgment of anathema against the Deoband pioneers. Let us begin with a brief introduction to Aḥmad Razā Khān and his intellectual persona.

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Aḥmad Razā Khān: An Arch Defender of Tradition in Modernity

Born in the North Indian town of Baraylī in 1856, one year before the Indian mutiny against the British, Aḥmad Razā Khān was among the most prolific, charismatic, and controversial scholars of his era. A staunch Ḥanafī jurist with impeccable credentials as a Sufi master in the Qādirī order, Khān was the founder of the Barelvī ideology in South Asia. His followers remember him as the foremost reviver (mujaddid) of Islam in modern South Asia. Khān came from a family of Afghan migrants to North India (more precisely to the region of Rohilkand) in the 17th and 18th centuries. His immediate ancestors had joined the Mughal imperial bureaucracy as soldiers and soldier-administrators.⁶

In fact, Khān’s great-grandfather, Ḥāfīẓ Kaẓim ‘Alī Khān, even served as the Nawāb of Awadh in Lucknow, though for the most part his family was part of the local landed elite who were granted land awards by the imperial authorities in return for their military service.⁷ It was only in the middle of the 19th century that his grandfather, Razā ‘Alī Khān (d.1866), brought a halt to the family tradition of serving in the military by becoming trained as a jurist and a Sufi in the Qādirī order. This transition was precipitated by the gradual erosion in the fortunes of the Muslim landed elite and the rising unemployment of Muslim soldiers during the 19th century.

In addition to being an accomplished jurist and a prolific scholar of Ḥadīth, Khān was equally immersed in such disciplines as logic, philosophy, philology, and rhetoric. He also composed a commentary on and a translation of the Qur’ān in Urdū. Khān received his juridical training in the traditional Dars-i Nizāmī curriculum from his father Naqī ‘Alī

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⁷ Ibid, 51.
Khān (d.1880), who was known as a prominent scholar and as a member of the aristocratic elite. Naqī ‘Alī Khān was also an arch opponent of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā’īl. He was among several other scholars in the generation following Ismā’īl’s death who wrote refutations of Taqviyyat al-Īmān.\(^8\) Indeed, much of Aḥmad Razā Khān’s antipathy towards Ismā’īl and towards Wahhābī ideology was inspired and nurtured by his father.

Khān is said to have completed his education in the Dars-i Nizāmī curriculum at the prodigious age of 13. Henceforth, he took on the responsibility of writing juridical opinions (fatāwā) on behalf of an Islamic seminary called “The Lamp of Knowledges” (Miṣbāḥ al- ‘Ulūm)\(^9\) that his father had established in Baraylī in 1872. Khān soon achieved recognition and fame for his nimble and thoughtful juridical opinions. By 1880, he had positioned himself as one of the foremost jurists and jurisconsults in India. On any given day, more than 500 requests for juridical opinions would arrive at Khān’s desk not only from all over India but also from such places as the Hijāz, China, Central Asia, Africa, and even the U.S.\(^10\) Khān continued the practice of writing juridical opinions at his own seminary called “The Sight of Islam” (Manẓar-i Islām) that he established in Baraylī in 1904.

Apart from his father, another major influence on Khān’s intellectual career was his Sufi master Shāh Āl-i Rasūl (d.1879), a charismatic figure from the North Indian township of Mārhara. Rasūl belonged to a highly venerated family of Sufi masters, the Barkatiyya, who were also descendants of the Prophet (Ṣayyid). Khān had become

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\(^9\) This seminary was originally named Miṣbāḥ al-Tahzīb.
Rasūl’s disciple before embarking on his first pilgrimage to Mecca in 1878, only a year before Rasūl’s death. But despite the relatively short time for which Khān served as Rasūl’s disciple, the latter played a critical role in shaping his outlook on Sufism and prophecy.

Khān’s two pilgrimages to the Ḥijāz in 1878 and in 1905 were critical moments in his intellectual career. During these visits, Khān established close relations with prominent scholars of that region, some of whom also served as his teachers. For instance, the acclaimed Meccan Shāfi‘ī scholar Aḥmad Zainī Daḥlān (d.1886) was an important influence on Khān’s intellectual formation. Khān had studied with Daḥlān during his first pilgrimage to Mecca in 1878. Like Khān’s father in India, Daḥlān was also an avid antagonist against Wahhābī ideology and wrote important tracts refuting the thought of Muḥammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.

As I will show in this chapter, Khān frequently mobilized Daḥlān’s ideas in waging his own assault against Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers.

Another important Arabian mentor for Khān was the well known Ḥanafī jurist and the chief jurisconsult of Mecca and Medīna during the late 19th century ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Sirāj Makkī (d. 1883). In similar fashion as Daḥlān, with whom he was closely associated, Sirāj Makkī also actively participated in the anti-Wahhābī campaign that occupied a number of Ḥanafī scholars in the Ḥijāz during this era. In addition to benefiting from his Arabian interlocutors, Khān also seems to have made a deep impression on them through his scholarly acumen.

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For instance, it was on the request of the prominent Meccan Ḥanafī scholar Ṣāliḥ Kamāl that Khān had composed his celebrated work on the question of the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown “The Meccan Gift on the Matter of the Unknown” (al-Dawlat al-Makkiyya bi-l-Mādat al-Ghaybiyya). Kamāl had sought Khān’s assistance in February 1906 after Wahhābī scholars issued a provocative pamphlet with five questions on the subject of the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown, challenging Ḥanafī scholars to answer them. Khān obliged Kamāl’s request and wrote al-Dawlat al-Makkiyya within a few days. This book was touted by scholars of the Hijāz in glowing terms as the most definitive refutation of Wahhābī views on the Prophet’s knowledge. It was also presented to the Sharīf of Mecca at that time ‘Alī Pāshā ibn ‘Abdallah (d.1932) and read aloud in his court. After listening to the contents of the book, the Sharīf exclaimed “God gifts [the Prophet knowledge of the unknown] and they [the Wahhabis] forbid it” (Allāh Yu’ṭī wa hum yamnaʿūn).

Khān’s writings encompass a remarkable range of themes and subjects including Qur’ān exegeses, Ḥadīth criticism, law, theology, philosophy and logic. Almost all of Khān’s works have been recently published in 32 volumes as “Al-Fatāwā al-Rizviyya” by the Barelvī press “Markaz-i Ahl-i Sunnat” in Gujrat, India. Each volume ranges from 500-700 pages containing an average of 10-15 articles of varying lengths. Although Khān primarily wrote in Urdū, he also composed several works in Arabic and Persian.

12 Aḥmad Razā Khān, al-Dawlat al-Makkiyya bi-l-Mādat al-Ghaybiyya (Karāchī, Pakistan: Maktaba Rizviyya, n.d.).
An excellent visual illustration of how Khān’s religious authority is remembered and constructed by his followers today is found on the front cover of each of his fatwā volumes, presented below as Figure 1.
Fig. 1 - Barelvi Foundations of Normativity
This visual provides a potent snapshot of the Barelvī self-imagination of their tradition, centered on the charismatic authority of Aḥmad Razā Khān. On the category of tradition, Ebrahim Moosa has recently commented that:

Tradition is both construct and covenant. Meticulous rules and protocols as to how one engages with those who belong to an intellectual and spiritual kinship of tradition is what I call ‘construct’. One’s imagined family—often more intimate than blood-ties—create a chain of links between the past and present. Unlike anthropologists and tourists, persons who self-identify with tradition do not do fieldwork, nor do they take trips into the past. Folks of tradition claim to do ontology: an investigation into the nature of being. But more than that, it is more about how they belong to that chain of being. The how is facilitated by covenant and contract: specific modes of practices and beliefs are signatures of participation in particular forms of life.15

The visual on the previous page mirrors Moosa’s description of tradition. It shows us the sources and hierarchies of normativity that enabled Aḥmad Razā Khān’s religious authority as a Sunnī Ḥanafī scholar. At the top of the hierarchy is of course the Qurʾān followed by the six canonical traditions of Hadīth in Sunnī Islam. Next we find the weight of tradition, the interpretive canvass that authoritatively connects prophetic time to the present; several canonical texts from various epochs, disciplines, and regions including Ghazālī’s Mustaṣfā, al-Taftazānī’s Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid, al-Marghinnānī’s Hidāya, Jāmī’s Nafaḥāt al-Uls, Fazl-i Imām Khayrābādī’s Mirqāt, among many others. All of these cumulatively constitute the ideology of Aḥmad Razā Khān, maslak-i Ā’la Hazrat, from which the 32 volumes of his fatāwā spring forth as knowledge that connects the past to the present; that establishes a normatively sanctioned “chain of ontological belonging.” Indeed, reading any of Khān’s writings feels much like taking a trip through the arcade of tradition. Khān was a master of citation. Almost all his works follow the

pattern of fortifying an argument by overwhelming the reader with a deluge of successive quotations from varied authorities and sources across time, space, and disciplines of knowledge.

The defining feature of Khān’s understanding of tradition was the active veneration of the Prophet as the most exalted of all beings. For Khān and his followers, honoring the Prophet’s status as God’s most beloved subject represented a non-negotiable doctrinal imperative. Anyone who even hinted at puncturing the aura of Muḥammad’s vatic nobility had to be confronted, repudiated, and deposed of his credibility. Khān’s passion for guarding the sacrality of Muḥammad’s prophetology was intimately attached to a larger political imaginary driven by an uncompromisingly hierarchical worldview. Indeed, a hierarchical vision of both the social and religious orders was one of the hallmarks of Khān’s conception of tradition. The human-divine relationship could only be sustained with the mediating authority of saints and the Prophet. Moreover, each entity occupied a successively advanced station (martaba) in the hierarchy of salvific activity. Khān’s theological imaginary also informed his social imaginary.

In the social arena, Khān maintained the superiority of the Prophet’s descendants (Sayyids) and people belonging to particular noble lineages (sharīf aqwām) such as Mughal Pathans, Ansaris, Siddiqis and Faruqis over the rest of Indian Muslims. To be more precise, it is not as if people of nobility were exempt from the requirements of

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17 Ibid, 62.
18 In the context of South Asia, the term Sharīf (pl. shurafā’) can either have an explicitly Islāmīc connotation meaning descendants of the Prophet (usually Sayyids) or may simply refer to clans that have historically served as the landed elite in the region. For more on their role in the politics of colonial and post-colonial South Asia, see David Gilmartin, Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).
religion or privy to any special concessions in the realm of law and justice. However, for Khān, nobility and noble lineages were important factors in how a community organized its norms of sociability and calibrated the rhythms and habits of the everyday. For example, in regard to such matters as norms of greeting each other, the etiquette of sitting in public gatherings, conducting oneself in the marketplace and other spheres of public interaction, it was important to cultivate an aesthetic taste or ethical predisposition (zawq) amenable to a vision of society that affirmed certain boundaries, privileges, and hierarchies.

Moreover, Khān argued that it was imperative for people of noble descent, especially women, to take lineal compatibility into consideration while deciding on the marital compatibility or suitability (kafā’a) of a spouse. For example, in one of his books devoted entirely to the subject of noble genealogies and their normative status in society, *Demonstrating Moral Etiquette for the Noble in Lineage (Irā’at al-adab li Faḍil al-Nasab)*, Khān declared, “it is impermissible for a Mughal or Pathān girl (mughlānī wa pathānī) who has not yet reached the age of marriage to marry a Muslim weaver (julāhā).” One must again stress that it is not as if Khān was tolerant of impiety or moral sluggishness in relation to people who boasted a noble lineage. On the contrary, he explicitly declared that virtuous practices can never be substituted by lineal nobility. Furthermore, he was extremely critical of people who took excessive pride in their lineage or tribal affiliations; Khān argued that such an attitude can only reflect someone’s utter ignorance about the normative model of the Prophet and the pious ancestors.

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20 Ibid, 206.
In a very telling moment, Khān was once asked for his opinion on the practice of ridiculing people by the name of their family occupation, a practice which seems to have been quite pervasive in Muslim North India at that time. As his questioner put it, “what is the opinion of the ‘ulamā’ on calling someone by the name of his ancestral occupation such as “weaver” (julāhā), “farmer” (kāshtkār), “fisherman” (māhī-furosh), hunter (shīkari), or “crooked-nosed weaver” (nūrbāf) as an insult when that hurts his feelings or breaks his heart (dil shiknī).” Khān responded decisively, “To break someone’s heart by calling such names is impermissible not only in the case of a Muslim but also an unbeliever under Muslim protection (kāfir zimmī), even if the content of the insult were actually true. For every truth is verifiable but not every verifiable is true (fa inna kullā haqqin šidq wa laysa kullā šidqin haqq).”

On another instance, a questioner asked Khān, “The prayer leader in our mosque has memorized the Qurʾān and steadfastly performs his five daily prayers. However, he is a butcher by profession. Is it permissible to pray behind him?” Khān responded, “Yes, as long as he is not a Wahhābī, Deobandī, or someone who holds such corrupt beliefs, it is fine to pray behind him. Being a butcher does not disqualify someone from serving as a prayer leader. Several pious ancestors also engaged in this profession.”

As these examples show, Khān was not an elitist supremacist by any means. However, he was unwavering in his claim that genealogical distinctions (tafāzul-i ansāb) were indispensible to a community’s normative compass. He firmly repudiated the modernist notion that genealogies and the social distinctions based on them were insignificant or useless. “Such an opinion”, Khān argued, was “rejected and false” (nasab ko muṭlaqan

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22 Ibid, 204.
23 Ibid, 255.
maḥaz be qadar barbad jān-nā mardūd wa bāṭil hay).”

Most important to note here is the affinity between how Khān understood the capaciousness of prophetic authority and his conception of the ideal norms of human relations in society at large. In both the salvific and social domains, a hierarchical arrangement of authority was imperative. Moreover, exalting the Prophet as the highest cosmic and ontological reality represented the ultimate motif for such a hierarchical political theology. And it was precisely this horizon of the political that was at the center of Khān’s rivalry with the early Deoband scholars. Khān’s refutation of Deobandī views on heretical innovation, to which I now turn, illumines this underlying disagreement very well.

**Don’t Mess with the Law: Khān’s Refutation of Deobandī Views on Heretical Innovation**

Aḥmad Razā Khān vigorously attacked Deoband scholars and Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl for their views on the limits of innovation in the arena of ritual practices. His most elaborate discussion on the theme of heretical innovation in Islam is found in a text entitled “Raising Armageddon against the Critic of Standing to Salute the Venerable Prophet” (*Iqāmat al-Qiyāma ‘alā Ṭāʿin al-Qiyām li Nabī Tihāma*). In this text, while focusing on demonstrating the legitimacy of standing while reciting the salutation in honor of the Prophet, Khān offered a much broader critique of what he regarded as his opponents’ erroneous understanding of the concept of heretical innovation. In the discussion that follows, I highlight the most salient elements of that critique.

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24 Ibid, 253.
Khān was most troubled by the readiness of his opponents to outlaw rituals that served as a means to honor the Prophet’s memory and example, such as his birthday celebration. He chastised them for cultivating a public sphere in which the exaltation of the Prophet and the pious ancestors was almost criminalized. Hermeneutically, he argued that an act can be deemed impermissible or forbidden only if a conclusive proof-text (naṣṣ-i qaṭ’ī) establishing such a judgment was available. The default value of all other practices that had not been forbidden by the sharī’a was that of permissibility (ibāḥat). In explaining this principle, Khān cited the 16th century jurist Muḥammad al-Qaṣṭalānī (d.1517) who in his well-known text Mawāhib al-Laduniyya had proclaimed, “The existence of an act [in the Prophet’s practice] indicates its permissibility but the non-existence of an act does not indicate its impermissibility” (al-fi’l yadul ‘alā al-jawāz wa ‘adm al-fi’l lā yadul ‘alā al-man’a).26

The principle that all non-forbidden practices were essentially permissible was also established by the Prophet’s saying “Those practices that God has declared as lawful in the Qur’ān are normatively lawful. Those practices that God has declared as forbidden in the Qur’ān are normatively forbidden. And those practices about which God has said nothing [in the Qur’an] are neither normatively sanctioned nor forbidden (al-ḥalāl ma aḥalla Allah fī kitābihī wa-l-ḥaram ma ḥarrama Allah fī kitābihī wa mā sakata ‘an hu fa huwa mi-mā ‘afā ‘an hu).”27 In legal terms, the implication of this prophetic saying was that unless a practice was explicitly forbidden in the sharī’a, it was permissible.

Khān accused his Deobandī rivals of falsifying divine law by prohibiting practices that were permissible in essence. Divine law, he emphasized, was eternal (abādī). Therefore, when the original normative value (aṣl) attached to an act was that of permissibility, calling it prohibited was equal to manufacturing an unsanctioned novel law. For Khān, such tampering with the normatively designated values of law undermined the sovereignty of that law.

The cardinal sin of Deoband scholars and Shāh Ismāʿīl, in his view, was their hubris in altering the logic of normativity by outlawing permissible practices. Khān would have agreed with his Deoband rivals (such as Thānvī) that the attachment of corruptions makes otherwise permissible practices heretical. However, where they sharply diverged from one another was in their evaluation of the present and its moral condition. In Khān’s view, there was no immediate emergency or moral chaos that necessitated dissuading people from undertaking rituals centered on venerating the Prophet. In fact, he argued, so long as there was no threat to divine sovereignty, prohibiting any means to exalt the Prophet by calling it heretical was itself heretical. For Khān, the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday and especially the act of standing up in reverence to him (qiyām) were no ordinary acts that could be discarded at will. Since this ritual represented a means to remember and honor the Prophet, it was indispensible to the tradition.

29 Ibid, 546-50
Competing Logic of Time and Tradition:

Conceptually, Khān’s major complaint against his opponents was the way they understood the interaction of tradition and temporality. According to Khān, the Deoband scholars held a very restricted and mistaken view of sacred time. As he put it, “All of them suffer from the disease of making time the ultimate sovereign on the boundaries of normativity (zamān ko ḥākim-i shar‘ī banāyā hay). Their only concern is whether a practice existed during a certain period in history (the era of the Prophet and Companions) or not. If a practice existed during that era, they will endorse it and if it did not, they will outlaw it.”

As a counterview to such a temporally driven hermeneutic, Khān argued that the normative validity of an act depended on its inherent goodness or lack thereof, not on the period in history in which it occurred. A good act was good whenever it may be undertaken. Similarly, a bad act, regardless of when it happened, was bad. Instead of evaluating the inherent quality of a practice, Khān regretted, his opponents were solely interested in determining whether it occurred during the first three centuries of Islam (qurūn-i salāsa) or not.

A hermeneutic so fixated with an original sacred time was bound to produce a very myopic understanding of tradition, Khān argued. No doubt, the era of the Prophet, his Companions, and their successors was most exemplary and sanctified. However, and this was the most crucial point, the sanctity of prophetic time did not mean that the rest of time; the non-prophetic past, the present, and the future were doomed to the abyss of moral failure. Goodness was not restricted to any specific time period, not even to the first three centuries. Khān punctuated his argument by citing the evocative prophetic

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30 Ibid, 532.
saying, “my community is like rain; one cannot tell whether the beginning of a rainshower is better or its end” (mathal ummatī mathal al-maṭar la yudrā awwalahu khayr am ākhiruhu).\(^{31}\)

For Khān, this prophetic report clearly showed that the horizon of goodness was not limited to any single temporal moment. The memory of an exemplary prophetic time was supposed to inspire the moral capacities of those who inhabited the present, not cripple them with the anxiety of living in the shadow of an irrecoverable past. In this regard, Khān’s conception of reform differed dramatically from that of his Deoband rivals. As I showed in the previous chapter, the reform project of Deoband scholars such as Ashraf ‘Ali Thānvī was anchored in a narrative of constant moral decline that necessitated an act of radical intervention from the learned elite. Given the urgency of the situation, even otherwise pious practices, such as the celebration of the Prophet’s birthday, were to be abandoned. The moral crisis confronting the present necessitated the conscious decision of discarding certain ritualized practices that had thrived in the past but that were now terminally corrupted.

Khān’s idea of reform was antipodal. For him, reform was animated by the mission of ensuring the continuity of the normative goodness embodied in such ritualized practices in each successive generation. Those who called such practices heretical were themselves committing the heresy of forbidding practices that had been sanctioned by esteemed scholars and luminaries of the tradition for several centuries.

Philosophically, Khān sternly objected to viewing history as afflicted with perpetual degeneration. Such a pessimistic way of imagining history invariably produced a markedly stagnant notion of time, one that was dualistically divided into an original

\(^{31}\) Ibid, 537.
sacred time followed by a progressively profane time. This kind of bipolarity was at odds with the example of none other than the Prophet’s Companions themselves, Khān argued.

The Prophet’s Companions, Khān stressed, celebrated the dynamicity of tradition.\textsuperscript{32} While evaluating the legitimacy of new practices, they invested their energies in determining the inherent merit of that practice rather than the time period in which it occurred. As an example, Khān narrated the story of a debate between the first two caliphs in Sunnī Islam, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, over systematizing the text of the Qurʿān. In the aftermath of the battle of Yamāma in 632, several Companions who had memorized the Qurʿān died. Following this development, ‘Umar became concerned that with the rapidity with which memorizers of the Qurʿān were dying (in battles), a significant portion of the text might soon be lost.

He urged ‘Abū Bakr, the Caliph at that time, to begin the work of compiling and systematizing the Qurʿān in earnest. At first, Abū Bakr hesitated. He inquired, “How can we do something that the Prophet had not?” ‘Umar responded to his senior colleague’s hesitation by saying, “By God it is a good thing to do (huwa wallāhī khayr).” As they engaged in this debate, Abū Bakr’s heart gradually opened up to ‘Umar’s suggestion. Eventually, he was convinced that this was indeed a meritorious act that demanded urgent attention. The project of systematizing the Qurʿān soon commenced.\textsuperscript{33}

For Khān, the most noteworthy aspect of this story was this: when Abū Bakr initially hesitated to start a new practice that was not found in the Prophet’s life, ‘Umar did not respond by valorizing the sacred temporality that shielded the Companions from any wrongdoing. He did not say, for instance, that the prohibition against innovation may

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 539-43.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 540-42.
have existed in a previous era but as Companions of the Prophet who occupy the first three centuries, we are exempt from such considerations. Rather, he tried to convince Abū Bakr based on the essential goodness of the act that he had advocated. It was the inherent quality of an act, not its presence or absence in a particular time period that drove ʿUmar’s argument.

In other words, Khān emphasized, ʿUmar’s imagination of normativity and its limits was not shackled to any singular hegemonic temporality that colonized the moral choices of all subsequent generations. To the contrary, he, like all other Companions, viewed tradition as continually blossoming, as a continously evolving moral project that was firmly rooted in its sacred origins. Khān vividly sketched such a relationship between temporality and tradition through the metaphor of a garden (bāgh).

Islam, he analogized, was Muḥammad’s garden, a garden that continues to grow in splendor and magnificence overtime. The original curators of the garden laid the foundational soil that ensured its capacity to survive during its fledgling years. However, they did not have the time or the opportunity to develop it any further. But gradually, the garden blossomed. It became luscious green, blanketed with breathtaking flowers, leaves, and fountains, as each generation of scholars and saints added new layers of beauty to what they had inherited from their predecessors.

Khān argued that tradition, like a blooming garden, represents a palimpsest of temporalities and thought-styles bound by a shared narrative of the moral good. Moreover, just like new varieties of flowers in a garden remain anchored to its original roots, new practices that are essentially good seamlessly connect with the logic of the Prophet’s normative example. Someone who objects to a praiseworthy act because it did
not exist during the first three centuries of Islam was as senseless as someone who denied
the beauty of new flowers in a garden, Khān parodied. “Ultimately,” Khān declared,
“such an ignorant fool will remain deprived of the garden’s fruits and flowers.”34

For Khān, devotional rituals that were new in their form but meritorious in essence
were comparable to the new flowers of a garden. Disputing their legitimacy was outright
buffoonery. Moreover, the most esteemed of such rituals were those that venerated the
Prophet’s status, such as the celebration of his birthday. He further argued that any
innovated act that exalted the Prophet was inherently praiseworthy and immune to
critique unless that act undermined God’s sovereignty. Khān authorized this position by
quoting the 16th century Shafi‘ī scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī (d.1567) who had said, “All
means of venerating the Prophet that do not undermine the exclusivity of divine
sovereignty are praiseworthy (ta‘zīm al-nabī bi-jamī‘ anwā‘ al-ta‘zīm alatī laysa fī-hā
mushārakat Allāh ta‘ālā fi’l-ulūhiyya ’amr mustaḥsan).”35

Haytamī’s cautionary precondition, Khān explained, referred to brazenly problematic
gestures such as prostrating before the Prophet or saying his name instead of proclaiming
“God is great” before sacrificing an animal. But all other expressions of honoring the
Prophet, such as standing up in his reverence constituted the loftiest of pious acts. Khān
challenged his opponents to present a conclusive proof-text from the Qur’ān or prophetic
reports if they wished to deny the legitimacy of practices that exalted the Prophet. In the
absence of such a conclusive proof-text, to outlaw an essentially good practice that was
deemed permissible by the sharī‘a constituted a challenge to the sovereignty of the
sharī‘a. Therefore, Khān concluded, scholars who opposed rituals such as the celebration

34 Ibid, 544-45.
of the Prophet’s birthday, including his Deobandī rivals, were playing God. They were outlawing rituals that God had not outlawed. Far from protecting divine sovereignty, such an inversion of divine law undermined that sovereignty. Furthermore, by calling heretical rituals that were a source of remembering the Prophet and other pious figures in the tradition, they were inventing a new law that contradicted all previous norms of etiquette. Indeed, for Khān, this debate was as much about etiquette as it was about law.

The enthusiasm of the Deoband scholars to prohibit avenues of exalting the Prophet was symptomatic of their poor etiquette and impoverished respect for the Prophet. That is why, Khān argued, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and his Deobandī followers instructed the masses to address the Prophet in the same manner as they addressed each other, to not hesitate from calling him their brother, and discouraged people from naming their children “the Prophet’s gift” (nabī bakhsh). These dramatic measures confirmed their disregard for the uniqueness of the Prophet’s charisma. They were turning the Prophet into merely an ordinary person. This view of prophetic authority, Khān punctuated, radically opposed the tradition of the pious ancestors. The Companions did not diminish the Prophet’s stature. To the contrary, they choreographed their entire lives around the imperative of demonstrating their love for him. As an illustration, Khān cited the example of the preeminent 8th century jurist and eponymous founder of the Mālikī School of law Mālik Ibn Anas (d.795).

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36 Ibid, 504-34.
Khān narrated:

When prospective students visited Mālik, a slave-girl would receive them and say, “The Shaykh asks what you wish to study, problems of jurisprudence or Ḥadīth?” If they replied jurisprudence, Mālik would immediately come out and begin the lesson. However, if they answered Ḥadīth, he would take his time in preparation. He would perform ablution, wear new clothes, apply perfume, and put on his turban. Then a special seat would be placed in front of him on which he would sit at an elevation. Only then would he begin the lesson. If someone inquired about the reason for such ceremonious preparations, he would respond: “I love exalting the Prophet’s words. Therefore, I don’t utter those words until I am in a state of utmost purity and physical excellence.\(^{37}\)

This was the kind of passion for elevating the Prophet’s being that was sorely in deficit among scholars who wished to outlaw the Prophet’s birthday celebration, Khān claimed. To sum up, in Khān’s view, the Deobandī reformist platform was not only legally invalid. More importantly, it also contravened long established norms of etiquette.

**Distinguishing Law and Habit:**

Barelvī and Deobandī attitudes towards the limits of innovation also differed on another subtle yet significant point, the role of habits in the construction of a community’s normative boundaries. As we saw in the last chapter, the Deobandī reform project was animated by the promise of disrupting habits and conventions that simulated obligatory religious practices. In the view of Deoband scholars, even praiseworthy rituals must be abandoned when they become so entrenched to a community’s life that whoever voluntarily abstains from them is collectively rebuked and censured. The emphasis of the Deoband School, therefore, was on transforming the practice of a community’s everyday life such that it replicated the normative boundaries of divine law.

\(^{37}\) Ibid, 547.
Philosophically, this position was authorized by the assumption that normative law and embodied habits were separable, the latter always conforming to the boundaries stipulated by the former. Aḥmad Razā Khān, on the other hand, articulated a very different conception of the relationship between law and habit. Khān argued that the law governing a community cannot be divorced from its habits. Therefore, he found nothing problematic with the regularization of customs and conventions that were essentially good and that served pious ends, even if they lacked a precedent from the Prophet’s normative model.

As I explained earlier, for Khān, the decisive factor in determining the normative legitimacy of an act was its inherent goodness, regardless of when it had been invented and introduced into the life of a community. Moreover, if a community agreed on regularizing certain pious practices in a way that conformed to its temperament and practical needs, that was to be encouraged and not repudiated. So for instance, Khān, in stark contrast to the pioneers of Deoband, was untroubled by the specification of a date or time (tawqīt al-waqt) for undertaking rituals such as celebrating the Prophet’s birthday or commemorating the birth anniversary of prominent saints. His argument here is worth considering in some detail for it shows in specific ways how his legal imaginary differed from that of his Deoband rivals.

Khān explained that in relation to the performance of devotional practices, there were two kinds of temporal specifications; specifications that were normatively demanded (tawqīt-i sharī‘) and those that were non-normative (tawqīt-i ʿādī). The first category included practices that according to the sharī‘a can only be performed during specified blocks of time. For instance, performing the five daily obligatory prayers at specified
times, undertaking the sacrifice of an animal in the three days following the annual ‘Īd celebration (ayyām al-nahr), completing the rites of pilgrimage during the months of Shawwāl, Dhul Qa’da and Dhul Ḥijja. These were all examples of normatively demanded specifications that were not available for alteration. On the other hand, non-normative specifications of time were not necessary. Instead, they served as a means to actualize and regularize ritual practices. As Khān put it in very simple terms, “for something to happen, there must be a specified time for it to happen.”\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, the birth/death anniversary of pious figures was commemorated every year or every six months. Similarly, gatherings for the transmission of blessings to the deceased were organized on the third and the fortieth day of a person’s death. The specification of a time served as a means to remind participants about the occurrence of such rituals. “When there is a specified time for an act, it is more likely to happen,”\textsuperscript{39} Khān explained.

Importantly, he was explicit in his warning that the temporal specifications attached to such practices must not be confused with normatively demanded specifications (such as those for daily prayers). On this point of preventing the confusion of obligatory and non-obligatory temporal specifications, Khān was in complete agreement with his Deoband rivals. However, for Khān, as long as people did not understand non-normative specifications as obligatory, there was no harm in them. To the contrary, specifying a date, he reasoned, represented a necessary means to ensure the continuity (mudāwamat) of spiritually beneficial practices overtime.\textsuperscript{40} Khān further argued that the normative

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 582.
\textsuperscript{40} Ahmad Razā Khān, Igāmat al-Qiyāma ʿalā Tāʾ in al-Qiyām li Nabī Tihāma in al-Fatāwā al-Rizviyya, vol. 26 (Gujrāt: Markaz-i Ahl al-Sunnat Barakāt-i Razā, 2006), 547.
practice of the Prophet and the Companions provided ample examples of temporal specifications for pious practices.

For instance, the Prophet visited the graves of martyrs at the beginning of every year, a practice continued by Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Similarly the Prophet’s close Companion ‘Abdallah ibn Mas‘ūd (d.650) had specified Thursday as a day for delivering his sermons. The most important thing to remember here, Khān urged his readers, was that none of these specifications were elevated to become normative; they remained at the level of habit and custom. It is not as if Ibn Mas‘ūd considered all days other than Thursday as inadmissible, inappropriate, or any less propitious for delivering sermons. His intention in specifying Thursday for delivering sermons was the regularization of a laudable practice. There was nothing illegitimate or harmful in regularizing a spiritually beneficial practice through the specification of a date.

Moreover, Khān continued, even if the specification of a date for a pious practice did not serve any obvious purpose or benefit, that specification could still not be called forbidden. The individual subject had the choice to specify a date if he so wished or to not specify a date if he so wished. In the case of all non-normative specifications \( (ta’ayyunāt-i ʿādiyya) \), the decision on instituting them or not rested solely with the individual practitioner, with no rewards or punishments attached to that decision. For Khān, this was the import of the Prophet’s saying “specifying Saturdays as a day for fasting will neither bring you rewards nor any punishment (ṣiyām al-sabt lā laka wa lā ʿalayka).”\(^{41}\) This prophetic saying meant that the specification of Saturday as a day for fasting represented a normatively neutral choice that carried no normative consequences,

\(^{41}\) Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, volume 6 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 368.
positive or negative. Further, the choice to institute and regularize Saturday as a day on which to fast was the prerogative of each individual subject.

Therefore, according to Khān, the objection of his Deoband rivals to specifying a date for permissible ritual practices opposed the normative model of the Prophet and the Companions. The heightened concern of the Deoband scholars that the specification of a date will cause permissible practices to simulate obligatory practices was a concern not shared by the Prophet. To the contrary, the Prophet showed remarkable confidence in the capacity of ordinary Muslims to choreograph the performance of their religious lives. Moreover, Khān advised, in case someone among the masses understood such specifications as normative or obligatory, then that attitude should be corrected on a case by case basis. A permissible ritual should not be altogether abandoned because of the potential threat that someone may understand it as obligatory.

In Khān’s view, rather than taking the measured approach of preventing corruptions in pious rituals or educating the masses on correct practice, the Deobandīs had imposed an absolute ban on those rituals. As a result, even people who did not hold corrupt beliefs, both among scholars and the masses, were denied participation in rituals that were deemed beneficial or permissible according to divine law. Herein we find a subtle yet critical point of difference between Khān and the Deoband scholars.

For the latter such as Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī, the specification of a date for non-obligatory rituals simulated obligatory practices and hence undermined the primacy of religious obligations. Hence, such a specification rendered otherwise permissible practices heretical. In stark contrast, for Khān, specifying a date made possible the ritualization of pious acts. As a result, it facilitated the secure transmission of the goodness embodied in
those acts from one generation to the next. In Khān’s imaginary, there was no reason to interrupt goodness unless there was an urgent need to do so.

Since divine law was eternal, the manifestation of that law in the life of a community did not require constant epistemological policing on the part of jurists and scholars. The job of a jurist was to ensure that the promised goodness of divine law became ritualized as part of a community’s everyday life. For Khān, the function of law was the perpetuation, not the prohibition, of morally beneficial rituals crafted in accordance with a community’s aesthetic sensibility. He argued that the prophetic saying “associate with people in accordance with their [good] character and oppose them in their [sinful] deeds (khāliqū al-nās bi akhlāqihim wa khālifūhum bi ‘āmālihim)”\(^{42}\) clearly substantiated his position.

Khān summed up his argument by citing the polymath 11th/12th century scholar Abu Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī (d.1111) who in his magnum opus The Resuscitation of Salvational Knowledges (Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn) wrote:

Every community has its own conventions. It is imperative to deal with people in accordance with the goodness of their character (as stated by the Prophet), especially in relation to practices that enable good conduct or the purification of hearts. And whoever calls such practices heretical innovations because the Companions did not take part in them is mistaken. All permissible practices were not transmitted by the Companions. Only a practice that opposes the normative model of the Prophet and the Companions can be called a heretical innovation.\(^{43}\)


Opposing the Authority of Tradition:

Aḥmad Razā Khān sought to frame his Deoband rivals as an aberrant group of Indian heretics whose ideology opposed all traditional sources of authority in Islam, past and present. In Khān’s view, the Deoband pioneers contravened the established consensus (ijmā’) of Sunni Muslim scholars. Why? Because Deoband scholars outlawed rituals that leading luminaries of the tradition had not only extolled as meritorious but in which they had personally participated with no reservations. For instance, contrary to the Deobandī position, an overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars had sanctioned the Prophet’s birthday celebration and the practice of standing up to offer salutations to the Prophet.

Khān mobilized a variety of authorities to assemble his case.

For example, according to the prominent 18th century Medinese scholar Sayyid Ja‘far al-Barzanjī (d.1766), “all learned scholars are in agreement that standing up to offer salutations to the Prophet is a laudable practice. Anyone who engages in this act with the intention of elevating the Prophet receives divine blessings.”

The eminent 19th century Shafi‘ī scholar in Mecca Ahmad Zainī Daḥlān, who was also among Khān’s teachers, echoed this sentiment when he wrote, “Expressing joy on the night of the Prophet’s birthday, reciting panegyrics in his honor, feeding those gathered at this ceremony and all such similar customs are meant to venerate the Prophet. These practices represent different articulations of piety (min anwā‘ al-bIRR). Numerous scholars have established the goodness of these practices in several books that contain a plethora of proofs and evidence. There is no need to say more.”

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Khān cited a range of other scholars from varied intellectual persuasions, geographical backgrounds, and moments in history who had categorically pronounced the *mawlid* and offering salutations to the Prophet as commendable acts. Some of these scholars included Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī, Aḥmad Qastalānī, ‘Alī Ibn Burhānudīn al-Ḥalabī (d.1634), Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d.1370), Muḥammad Ibn Yaḥyā al-Tādifī (d.1556), Yūsuf Ibn Yaḥyā al-Ṣarṣarī (d.1258), ‘Abdul Wahḥāb Shaʻrānī (d.1565), among several others. According to Khān, the Deobandī opposition to pious practices such as the *mawlid* contravened the consensus established by all these scholars. Khān argued that the ideology of the Deoband pioneers challenged the validity of the Prophet’s saying, “my community does not coalesce around a misguidance (*la tajtamiʿ ummatī ‘alā al-ḍalāla*)”46 If one held the Deobandī view that the *mawlid* and the practices attached to it were heretical innovations, then one will have to concede that all these leading scholars were also heretics. The choice, in Khān’s view, was clear and stark.

As he put it, addressing his readers, “You decide. Is the consensus of so many scholars from Mecca, Medina, Syria, Egypt, Yemen, Daghistan, Andalusia, and India unreliable? Or should we assume that these pillars (*ʿamāʿ id*) of the tradition are in fact heretics and people of bad faith who for hundreds of years have been misguiding their communities by calling repugnant heresies pious and praiseworthy.”47

Khān continued his assault on the Deoband School by suggesting to his readers a vivid exercise. He prescribed:

For a few moments, cleanse your heart from the thought of all the rival ideologies in Muslim India. Forget about their competing positions on contentious questions. Just close your eyes, bow your head, and imagine. Imagine as if several preeminent scholars, past and present, are all alive and they have gathered in a magnificent place. The question of the legitimacy of the mawlid and that of standing up to venerate the Prophet comes before them. All of them say in one voice, creating a mesmerizing crescendo, “No doubt it is a commendable practice. Who calls it bad? He should dare come before us.” Now consider the splendor and glory of these scholars. And then reflect on the status of these few Indian detractors [Deobandīs] of the Prophet. In this moment will any one of them have the courage to step into this gathering and confront the assembled crowd of leading scholars?48

Khān argued that the Deoband pioneers were able to freely express and disseminate their heretical views because of the absence of an Islamic state and ruler in late 19th century India. The Deobandīs, he argued, were taking full advantage of a political environment in which there was no sovereign authority to reprimand them for their derogatory views on the Prophet. Otherwise, in a functional Muslim polity, it would have been incumbent on the ruler to formally punish (taʿzīr) the Deoband scholars for their brazen opposition to the consensus of the community.

The absence of an institutional framework to regulate religious discourse had provided the Deobandīs the opportunity to say whatever they wanted. Khān argued that the Deobandī ideology would never have survived in a Muslim state. In other words, in Khān’s view, British colonialism represented the condition of possibility for the emergence and flourishing of the Deobandī ideology. However, Khān emphatically underscored, although his Deoband rivals were spared punishment by a worldly colonial government, they were certainly destined to hell in the afterlife according to the Prophet’s

48 Ibid.
saying “follow the greatest majority of believers for he who deviates from that majority deviates into hell (ittabiʿū al-sawād al-ʿazam fa inna-hu man shadhda shadhda fiʾl-nār).” In short, for Khān, the Deoband pioneers were cheapening the doctrinal authority of consensus by articulating a reformist agenda that overwhelmingly opposed the practice and opinion of leading scholars.

Contradicting the Walī Allah Family:

In Khān’s view, the Deobandī assault on certain ritual practices was even at odds with the life and practice of seminal authorities whom the Deoband scholars themselves counted as among their intellectual forbears. More specifically, Khān argued that the Deoband reform project entirely contradicted the thought of the celebrated 18th century scholar Shāh Walī Allah and his prominent sons Shāh ʿAbdul ʿAzīz and Shah Raḥīm al-Dīn. According to their official narrative, Khān contended, the Deoband pioneers valorized themselves as the true inheritors of the Walī Allah legacy. However, on closer inspection, one found a stark disparity between the position of Walī Allah and his sons and that of Deoband scholars on the legitimacy of contested rituals. As an example, Khān highlighted Walī Allah’s unequivocally charitable attitude towards the ritual of transmitting blessings to the deceased (iṣāl-i sawāb) through the offering (naẓar) of food (also known as the fātiha).

According to Khān, in contrast to Deobandīs and Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl who called this ritual a corrupt heretical innovation, the Walī Allah family unreservedly participated in this practice and also encouraged others to do so. For instance, Shāh Walī Allah once narrated that his father, the famous Ḥadīth scholar Shāh ʿAbdul Raḥīm, used to prepare and distribute food every year to transmit blessings to Prophet Muḥammad’s

soul. One year, due to financial hardship, Shāh ‘Abdul Raḥīm was unable to procure any food except fried chickpeas (ḥimsan maqlīyan), which he distributed among people. Later that night, the Prophet appeared in Raḥīm’s dream. The Prophet was smiling and gleaming, with those chickpeas nestled between his hands.”

Shāh Walī Allah himself had categorically stated that “there was no harm in cooking and feeding pasted sweets (malīda) and rice pudding (shīr birinj) with the intention of transmitting blessings [acquired through this act of charity] to the soul of a saint (agar malīda wa shīr birinj binā bar fātiha-yi buzurg-i bi-qāṣdī īsāl-i sawāb beh rūḥ-yi īshān pazand wa bukhurānand muzā ’iqā nīst.)” On another instance, Wali Allah had instructed his followers to “recite the opening chapter of the Qur’an (al-fātiha) every day over some sweets (shūrīnī) to transmit blessings to the celebrated Sufis of the Chishti order (bar qadr-i shūrīnī-yi fātiha be nām-i khwājagān-i chisht bi khwānand.. wa hamīn āwar har rūz mi khwāndi bāshand.)”

Similarly, in his well-known text on Shi‘ī thought and history The Gift of the Shi‘is (Tuḥfat Ithnā ‘Ashariyya), Walī Allah’s son Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz had stated that “all Muslims regard ‘Alī and his blessed family as their spiritual leaders and guides who are connected to divine orders of existence (umūr-i takvīniyya).” Reciting prayers and

53 “Umūr-i Takvīniyya” (sing. amr-i takvīnī) refers to divine orders or commands by virtue of which things are the way they are. One may think of this concept as the divine commands that order the ontology of the world. Umūr-i Takvīniyya is contrasted with the idea of “Umūr-i Taklīfiyya” (sing. amr-i taklīfī). Umūr-i Taklīfiyya means divine normative orders that institute legal prescriptions to be followed by subjects. See Michel Chodkiewicz, The Spiritual Writings of Amir ‘Abdul Kader (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), 220 and Michael Sells, Mystical Languages of Unsaying (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 250.
panegyrics, expending charity, making vows, and giving offerings of food in their name is common and widespread among people, just as these practices are common in relation to all revered friends of God (hazrat-i amīr wa zuriyyat-i ṭāhira-yi ū rā tamām ummat bar misāl-i pīrān wa murshidân mī purastand wa umūr-i takvīniyya rā wābasta bi īshān mī dānand wa fātiha wa durūd wa ṣadaqāt wa nazār wa manat bi nām-i īshān rā’ij wa ma’mul gardīde chunānche ba jamī’ awliya’ Allah hamīn mu’āmala ast.)."54

Further, in his commentary of the Qur’ān Tafsīr-i ‘Azīzī, Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz likened the soul of a recently deceased person to someone who was about to drown in water. As he described, “just like a drowning person desperately screams for assistance, a recently deceased person cries out for the prayers and blessings of those he has left behind in the world. In these moments all forms of prayers, charity, and offerings of food provide much benefit and solace to the deceased.” “This is why,” he explained, “in the year following someone’s death and especially during the first forty days, people do their utmost to assist the deceased by performing such acts of piety.”55

Shāh Walī Allah and his sons did not only endorse the practice of transmitting blessings to the deceased by distributing food or by reciting the fātiha over food in general terms, Khān insisted. Moreover, in contrast to the Deobandīs, they were also unfazed by the attachment of specifications to this ritual that were not found in the sharī’a but that conformed to local customs and habits. For instance, Shāh Rafī’ al-Dīn (Shāh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz’s younger brother) explicitly declared that the specific manner in


which a ritual is organized and conducted should depend on the convenience and temperament of its participants.

As an example, Rafi’ al-Dīn argued that there was nothing problematic about the specifications usually attached to the ritual of transmitting blessings to the deceased by distributing food among people.\(^{56}\) For instance, in his view, there was nothing problematic about the popular Indian custom of specifying food items for distribution according to the personality on whom blessings were transmitted. So the practice of specifying rice lentils (Khichdī) for transmitting blessings to the Prophet’s grandson Ḥusayn or flour balls (tosha) to transmit blessings to the famous 16\(^{th}\) century Indian Hadith scholar ‘Abdul Ḥaqq Dihlavī was completely valid. Rafi’ al-Dīn argued that the decision to institute such specifications rested entirely with the organizers of of an event of this kind. Moreover, he explained that these kinds of humanly invented specifications initially enter into a community’s life because they fulfill certain practical benefits. Gradually, they become ritualized as part of that community’s everyday habits and customs (\(\text{\textit{īn takhṣīsāt az qism-i ‘urf wa ‘ādat and keh bi-maṣailih-yi khāsa wa munāsabat-i khufiyya be zuhūr āmadeh wa rafta rafta shuyyū’ yāft.}\))\(^{57}\) There was nothing objectionable about this process of ritualization, Shāh Rafi’ al-Dīn had argued. Therefore, the attachment of such specifications on devotional rituals; specifications that enabled the regularization of those rituals, was not illegitimate or normatively unsound.

In Aḥmad Ṣafī Khān’s view, Rafi’ al-Dīn’s generous opinion about the ritualization of customary habits and conventions contradicted the reform project of the Deobandīs.

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\(^{57}\) Ibid, 592.
and that of Shah Muhammad Isma‘īl. In contrast to the pioneers of Deoband, Shāh Walī Allah and his sons did not suffer from hyper anxiety about the elevation of non-obligatory practices into religious obligations. Rather, consistent with the view of authoritative past and present Sunnī scholars, they were willing to accommodate a community’s aesthetic choices and practical welfare in the determination of its normative boundaries. Further, unlike their so-called Deobandī heirs, they did not rush to outlaw pious practices and rob the masses of avenues to honor revered figures in the tradition.

Khān further argued that Wali Allah and his sons were not driven by an attitude of vigilantism that led them to constantly police embodied life in search of signs of corruption and moral decay. Rather, they empowered the community to attain the normative goodness found in pious rituals in accordance with its temperament, character, and practical needs. In contrast, the Deoband pioneers and Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl cultivated a public sphere that was perpetually enveloped by the fear of transgression. Because of their excessively pessimistic outlook on the capacity of the masses to organize their religious lives, the Deobandīs criminalized praiseworthy rituals that their own intellectual forbearers had explicitly sanctioned. This contradiction, Khān claimed, showed the unabashed hypocrisy of the Deoband pioneers. On the one hand, the Deobandīs were unsparing in chastising anyone who participated in rituals such as the mawlid or the fātiḥa (transmitting blessings to the deceased). However, on the other hand, they raised no objection against their own intellectual masters when the latter engaged in and praised those very practices.

As Khān put it, “according to the Deobandī ideology, Wali Allah and his sons are without doubt guilty of “innovating in religion” and of committing blatant heresies. They
clearly invented rituals that were never found in previous centuries. But the Deobandīs would never call them lost or heretical. Instead, they call them esteemed scholars, leaders of faith, and renowned gnostics… But in comparison, other people who participate in those same rituals are damned as misguided heretics.”

“Perhaps the sin of everyone else,” Khān continued sarcastically, “is that they take part in certain praiseworthy practices in a manner that is sanctioned by the shari‘a. What can one say to such warped jurisprudence (in taḥakkum-i be-jā rā che gufta āyad)?”

To sum up, according to Khān, the Deoband scholars were inventing a new shari‘a that opposed all authorities of the tradition (including their own predecessors) and that punished people for engaging in pious and normatively sanctioned practices. Ironically, while pretending to combat heresy and innovation, the Deobandīs were in fact engineering a heretical moral order that inverted the logic of all previously established conceptions of normativity.

Most importantly, in Khān’s view, the Deoband pioneers were playing God by haphazardly vetoing the established consensus of the community and imposing over it their own sovereign will. By tampering with divine law, the Deobandīs were questioning the eternality of that law. In effect, they were brazenly challenging God’s sovereignty as the sole author of law and its limits. Therefore, Khān argued, the supposed Deobandī passion for restoring divine sovereignty was nothing but a farce. For in the guise of protecting divine sovereignty, the Deobandīs in fact arrogated that sovereignty to themselves. In the process, they cheapened the sovereign force of divine law and demeaned its vatic sanctity. As Khān sarcastically protested, addressing his Deoband

59 Ibid.
rivals, “Is the sharī’a your home run business that you may play and mess with whenever you so wish?” (sharī‘at kār-i khānagī-yi shumāst keh har chūn khwāhid pahlū gardānīd).60

Conclusion:

At the heart of Khān’s disagreement with Deoband scholars was the question of how should divine law interact with a community’s conception of the moral good. For Khān, a community’s imagination of moral goodness reflected divine will. This, he argued, was the import of the prophetic saying “that what Muslims consider good is good in God’s view (ma ra‘ā-hu-l-muslimūna ḥasanun fa huwa ‘inda Allahi ḥasan).”61 Divine will and the embodied life of a community were in harmony. Therefore, the habits and conventions of a community, as long as they did not explicitly oppose the sharī‘a, did not require constant monitoring on the part of the scholarly elite. The task of scholars was to preserve the eternality of the normative values prescribed by divine law, instead of tampering with those values, a sin of which he found the Deobandīs guilty.

The Deoband scholars, as I showed in the previous chapter, were much less confident about the capacity of the masses to abstain from transgression. The corruption of time and habits necessitated an aggressive agenda of reform. The emphasis of the Deobandī rationality of reform was on transformation, not on continuity. Reform, in their view, meant the transformation of a community’s habitus, and the interruption of its continuity. Shāh Muḥammad Ismā’īl and the Deoband scholars called for a break with the habits and

60 Ibid.
customs of the past that in their view threatened the radical absoluteness of divine sovereignty.

Aḥmad Razā Khān, in contrast, articulated a competing logic of tradition and reform. For Khān, reform entailed the preservation of authorized traditions, not their reinvention. He argued that the Deobandī zeal for transforming embodied life was misplaced and excessive. Moreover, he accused his Deoband rivals of sabotaging established customs and traditions that provided moral guidance to the community and that exalted the Prophet and other exemplary figures in the tradition. In the guise of purifying conventions from accumulated corruptions, Khān argued, Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʻīl and the Deoband scholars denied the masses the normative goodness of the past. In the process, they also tampered with divine law by prohibiting practices that God had not prohibited and that had been sanctioned by esteemed Muslim scholars for many centuries. Therefore, in Khān’s view, Deoband scholars not only outlawed rituals that venerated the Prophet, they also challenged the authority of revered scholars from the tradition by questioning the soundness of their judgment. In short, Khān charged his Deoband rivals of molesting tradition in a way that compromised its integrity and that detracted from the Prophet’s charisma.

But despite Khān’s serious differences with Deoband scholars on the limits of heretical innovation, this was not the reason for his judgment of anathema (takfīr) against them. That judgment was delivered for a much more specific reason, namely certain controversial statements aired by the early Deoband scholars regarding the Prophet’s capacity for knowledge of the unknown. This debate was animated by competing views on the normative relationship between knowledge, sovereignty, and prophetic authority.
A close analysis of this debate will further sharpen our understanding of the ideological fault-lines that divided Deobandī and Barelvī imaginings of tradition. It is to this task that I now turn.
Chapter 4

Knowing the Unknown: Contesting the Sovereign Gift of Knowledge

Aḥmad Razā Khān and his Deoband rivals agreed that knowledge and prophetic authority were intimately intertwined. They also agreed on the doctrinal tenet that the Prophet was the most knowledgeable, authoritative, and beloved of God’s creation. However, they sharply departed on the critical questions of how should one define knowledge and what precisely was its relationship to prophetic authority.

These were also the underlying questions that precipitated a polemic that eventually led Aḥmad Razā Khān to anathematize the pioneers of Deoband: Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī, and Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī.¹ At the center of this polemic were two statements by Sāharanpūrī and Thānvī on the Prophet’s capacity for knowledge of the unknown (‘ilm al-ghayb). Since their original utterance, these statements have achieved the status of what one might call canonical discursive moments that have been incessantly dissected and debated for more than a century. Khān had declared the Deoband pioneers unbelievers on the specific charge that these two statements contravened the necessities of religion (zarūriyyāt-i dīn).

In this chapter, I examine the content and context of these statements, Khān’s refutation of them, and finally, the Deobandī response to Khān’s refutation by the 20th century Indian Deoband scholar Manẓūr Nu’mānī (d.1997). Through a close investigation of this polemical moment, I will highlight the opposing ways in which Khān and his

¹ Khān also anathematized the other founder of Deoband Qāsim Nānautvī on the charge of denying the finality of the Prophet. That is a separate debate which will not be dealt with in this chapter.
Deoband rivals imagined the relationship between knowledge, sovereignty, and prophetic authority, an issue that remains the most explosive point of disagreement between the Barelvī and Deobandī schools.

I will show that at stake in this polemic seemingly centered on the limits of prophetic knowledge was the very definition of religion in modernity. The question of whether the Prophet possesses knowledge of the unknown pivoted on an a priori specification of what counted as knowledge. In turn, the decision on the boundaries of knowledge depended on defining the kinds of knowledge that counted as religious. As a corollary, the definition of religious knowledge was inextricable to defining religion. Indeed, what I hope to show is that this polemic was as much about the limits of religion as an ideological category as it was animated by competing understandings of prophetic knowledge and authority.

The Beginnings:

This debate had originally erupted on the question of the Prophet’s appearance during his birthday celebration to bestow blessings on the participants at the gathering. Deobandī scholars including Gangohī, Sāharanpūrī, and Thānvī, opposed such a possibility. They argued that a belief in the Prophet’s capacity to visit multiple venues simultaneously will lead the masses to think that he is omniscient. Therefore, they contended, the masses will begin attributing divine qualities to the Prophet. The prominent North Indian scholar ‘Abdul Samī’ tried to rebut this argument in his scathing refutation of Deobandī thought *Glistening Lights*. Samī’ was not a disciple of Aḥmad Razā Khān. Therefore, technically, it would be inaccurate to call him a “Barelvī scholar.” However, his repudiation of the

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Deobandī ideology in *Glistening Lights* implicated him in the Barelvī-Deobandī polemic. His views on the major contentious questions of theology and ritual practice that divided Deobandī and Barelvī scholars almost entirely overlapped with those of Aḥmad Razā Khān’s.

Samī’ was a prominent Sunnī Ḥanafī scholar from the North Indian town of Rāmpūr (hence he is also known as Abdul Samī’ Rāmpūrī). Curiously, major Deoband scholars including one of the founders of the school Qāsim Nānautvī and the notable Ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad ʿAlī Sāharanpūrī (d.1880) were among Samī’s teachers. But despite the imprints of important Deobandī scholars in his intellectual genealogy, by 1884 when he wrote *Glistening Lights*, Samī’ had become one of the most fierce and unsparing critics of the Deoband school.3

In *Glistening Lights*, Samī’ chastised Deoband scholars for their position that a belief in the Prophet’s capacity to visit multiple venues during his birthday celebration constituted polytheism. He counter argued that this belief posed no threat to divine sovereignty, as the Deoband scholars claimed.4 Samī’ explained that polytheism means associating with a non-divine entity the kind of knowledge that God possesses. However, he emphasized, knowledge of all the venues where the Prophet’s birthday is held cannot be compared with God’s infinite knowledge.

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3 Unfortunately there is an absence of biographical literature on Samī’ that may shed light on how and when his antipathy for the Deoband school matured.

God is omniscient of and omnipresent in every moment of time and in every corner of all universes. In comparison to this infinite knowledge, knowledge about the places where the Prophet’s birthday is celebrated is infinitesimally miniscule, Samī’ argued. Therefore, a belief in the Prophet’s capacity to appear at multiple places simultaneously cannot possibly imply the equation (barābarī) of prophetic and divine knowledges. And nor can it be taken to mean that the Prophet has assumed partnership in the divine attribute (mushārakat fī ṣifat-i ilāhī) of absolute knowledge. That interpretation would only be valid, Samī’ insisted, if God’s knowledge and presence were also limited to mawlid gatherings. Since that was not the case, a belief in the Prophet’s appearance during his birthday celebration did not oppose or threaten divine sovereignty, and nor did it create any possibility of polytheism.\(^5\)

Samī’ explained that a divine attribute (ṣifat) is defined as something that is only found in God and not in anyone other than Him (yūjad fī-hī wa lā yūjad fī ghayri-hī). The capacity to be present at all places in the world, he claimed, is not among those attributes. This capacity is not specific to God. For instance, Samī’ elaborated, the angel of death’s (malik al-mawt) extensive ability to traverse the entire universe is well-known. He has access to all humans, beasts, insects, and birds. Wherever any of God’s creation dies, he is present. Moreover, Samī’ further argued, let alone angels, even Satan follows all of humanity day and night (except those who are protected by God’s mercy). God has granted Satan the capacity to be present at all places at all times, just as He has gifted that capacity to the angel of death. Therefore, according to Samī’, by negating that same capacity for the Prophet, Deoband scholars were effectively calling the Prophet lesser in

\(^5\) Ibid.
status (fazl) than Satan and the angel of death.\(^6\)

In Samī’s view, by gainsaying the comprehensiveness of the Prophet’s knowledge, the Deobandīs were demonstrating their own incapacity to perceive prophetic grace. Samī clarified that his argument should not be confused to mean that the Prophet necessarily visits every gathering of his birthday celebration. Rather, his point was that a person who holds this belief cannot be called a polytheist. Why? Because even entities that are lesser in status than the Prophet, such as Satan and the angel of death, possess the capacity to be present at innumerable sites simultaneously.

It was thus inconceivable for the Prophet to not possess that same capacity. Anyone who even hinted that the Prophet’s knowledge was inferior to the knowledge of Satan and the angel of death was guilty of insulting and demeaning the Prophet.\(^7\) This in a nutshell was Samī’s charge against the Deoband school on the question of prophetic knowledge. The Deobandī response to Samī’s allegation was led by Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī’s chief disciple and prominent scholar of Ḥadīth, Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī.

Among the pioneers of Deoband, Sāharanpūrī served as the president of the Deoband affiliated Mazāhir al-‘Ulūm Madrasa in the North Indian town of Sāharanpūr for several years. He mentored and inspired some of the most influential 20\(^\text{th}\) century Indian Muslim scholars including the founding luminaries of the transnational evangelical movement Tablīghi Jamā’at, Muḥammad Ilyās Kāndlavī (d.1944) and his nephew Muḥammad Zakariyya Kāndlavī (d.1982). Therefore, Sāharanpūrī represents a pivotal connection between the Deoband School and the Tablīghī Jamā’at. Sāharanpūrī was primarily a

\(^6\) Ibid, 54-57.
\(^7\) Ibid.
scholar of Ḥadīth. Among his most well known texts is an extensive commentary on Abū Dawūd’s (d.889) Ḥadīth collection entitled *A Painstaking Endeavor in [Explicating] Abū Dāwūd’s Prophetic Reports* (*al-Baḍl al-Majhūd fī Sunan Abī Dāwūd*).

In addition to his role as a notable scholar of Ḥadīth, Sāharanpūrī was also a major player in the Barelvi-Deobandi polemics. In 1888, at the behest of his master Rashīd Ahmad Gangohī, Sāharanpūrī composed a point by point refutation of ‘Abdul Samī’s *Glistening Lights*. Sāharanpūrī appropriately titled his refutation *Conclusive Proofs on the Darkness of Glistening Lights*. In this text, he tried to rebut Samī’s claim that Deoband scholars considered Satan more knowledgeable and hence of a higher status than the Prophet. Sāharanpurī’s response is at the center of this dispute. I thus analyze it in some detail next.

**Uncoupling Knowledge and Status: Sāharanpūrī’s Response to Samī’**

In his rejoinder, Sāharanpūrī scoffed at Samī’s suggestion that Deobandi scholars regarded Satan as higher in status than the Prophet. While clarifying their position on knowledge and prophetic authority, he explained that God has gifted each entity among His creation a specific proportion of knowledge. Further, to associate with any entity even one bit more knowledge than what it has been divinely ordained constitutes polytheism.  

For Sāharanpūrī, God’s privilege to gift knowledge and to limit the degree of knowledge possessed by all entities other than Him was incontrovertibly established in the Qur’ānic verse “God has the keys to knowledge of the unknown; no one knows it

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except Him."⁹ Sāharanpūrī underscored that the sin of polytheism was not limited to only equating divine and prophetic knowledge. Rather, the mere association of a divine privilege such as His absolute knowledge with a non-divine entity represented polytheism. This rule applied to all non-divine entities, including the Prophet.¹⁰ As evidence for this principle, Sāharanpūrī cited the Ḥanafī ruling (contained in texts such as *Bahṛ ar-Rāʿiq⁹¹ and *Durr-i Mukhtār¹²) that whoever undertakes a marriage contract (*nikāḥ) taking God and the Prophet as active witnesses at the ceremony becomes an unbeliever.

This was so because of the implicit assumption that the Prophet possesses knowledge of the unknown. The crucial point to keep in mind, Sāharanpūrī reminded, was the categorical prohibition against associating knowledge of the unknown with the Prophet. There was no qualification that polytheism would only occur if one quantitatively and qualitatively (*kamman wa kayfan) equated divine and prophetic knowledges. Had that been the case, Sāharanpūrī continued, one would have to concede that the Arab polytheists during the Prophet's time were not really unbelievers.

After all, they did not associate absolute sovereignty and knowledge with any one divinity. They used to believe in multiple false divinities (*maʿbudān-i bāṭila), each with its separate domain of authority. According to Sāharanpūrī, all non-divine entities, including all prophets, Satan, and the angel of death, were divinely ordained with a

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⁹ Qurʾān, 6:59.
¹⁰ Sāharanpūrī, 55.
specific capacity (\textit{wus'at}) for knowledge that they can neither exceed nor fall short off.\textsuperscript{13}

Most importantly, Sāharanpūrī argued, that gifted capacity for knowledge was unrelated to spiritual status. Indeed, Sāharanpūrī’s entire argumentative apparatus rested on the claim that status does not depend on knowledge of the physical world. An entity with lesser knowledge may well have a higher status. For example, he explained, Moses was much more exalted and privileged than the revered figure in the \textit{Qur'ān}, Khidhr. This despite the fact that Moses’ capacity for the unveiling of knowledge (\textquote{ilm kā mukāshafa}) was much less advanced than Khidhr’s. Their capacity for knowledge was limited to what they were gifted by God, despite the marked disparity in their status.

Sāharanpūrī concurred with Samī that the expansive knowledge provided by God to Satan and the angel of death is incontrovertibly established by conclusive proof-texts (\textit{nuṣūṣ-i qaṭī 'a}). However, on that basis, one cannot advance the analogy that a more privileged and exalted entity, such as the Prophet, must have at least as much if not more knowledge than Satan and the angel of death. To the contrary, Sāharanpūrī advised, several conclusive proof-texts establish the Prophet's inaccessibility of knowledge of the unknown.

For example, the prophetic saying, "I do not know what will be done to me or to you [on the Day of Judgment]" (\textit{lā adrī mā yuf'il bi wa lā bikum}) clearly showed the Prophet's own repudiation of associating knowledge of the unknown with him. The critical flaw in Samī’s hermeneutic, Sāharanpūrī maintained, was his inability to differentiate between status and knowledge. Just because the Prophet was more privileged than Satan, it did not

\textsuperscript{13} Sāharanpūrī, 55.
mean that he must also be more knowledgeable. Knowledge and status were not proportional, as Samī’ had erroneously assumed. Sāharanpūrī also chastised Samī’ for mobilizing an analogy in opposition to a conclusive proof-text.

Doxological questions (‘aqā’id ke masā’il), he sternly warned, cannot be resolved through analogies. They require conclusive proof-texts. According to Sāharanpūrī, in the absence of a conclusive proof-text demonstrating the Prophet’s extensive knowledge of the physical world, Samī’s argument was invalid. At was at this point that Sāharanpūrī said something that would haunt his legacy, and ignite polemical battles for several decades. He said:

_Satan’s and the angel of death’s immense capacity for knowledge of the physical world (‘ilm-i muḥīṭ-i zamīn) are established from conclusive proof-texts. Show me a conclusive proof-text that proves such a capacity for the Prophet?! What is it if not polytheism to contravene conclusive proof-texts with the corrupt analogy (qiyyās-i fāsida) that since the Prophet holds a higher status than Satan and the angel of death he must also possess more knowledge than them_15.

According to Sāharanpūrī, knowledge served as the primary constituting force of sovereignty. In his view, the divine privilege over knowledge of the unknown was critical to maintaining the absolute alterity of divine sovereignty. Moreover, divine sovereignty was at once generated and mediated by knowledge. In Sāharanpūrī’s discourse, God gifted all entities other than Him a fixed proportion of knowledge. The capacity of all non-divine entities to possess knowledge was predetermined according to a divinely authorized epistemological program. Most importantly, God’s sovereignty depended on

14 Ibid, 53-56.
15 Ibid, 53.
the integrity of that program. Any disturbance to that program threatened the sovereignty of its architect, God.

This is why the suggestion that the Prophet can visit multiple sites simultaneously during the mawlid ceremony was unpalatable to Sāharanpūrī. What Sāharanpūrī found heretical was the implication that the Prophet had exceeded the limits of knowledge that God had gifted him. In Sāharanpūrī’s theological imaginary, knowledge was God’s gift to others. The gift of knowledge also established God’s sovereignty over the recipients of that gift. One may put it this way: by gifting knowledge to others, God gifted to Himself His sovereignty. The gift of knowledge secured the gift of sovereignty. And most importantly, no non-divine entity, not even the Prophet, was allowed to trespass the limits of that divinely sanctioned gift.

But Sāharanpūrī’s attempt to dissociate knowledge (‘ilm) from status (fazl) was not free of ambiguities. Perhaps the most ambivalent aspect of this attempted separation of knowledge and status was the status he accorded to knowledge itself. One the one hand, Sāharanpūrī’s entire argument rested on the claim that knowledge and status are not necessarily proportional or even related. It is this move that allowed him to simultaneously venerate the Prophet as the most exalted being and also humanize him as someone whose knowledge was lesser than that of Satan and the angel of death.

But on the other hand, his argument for the absolute exclusivity of divine sovereignty hinged precisely on the exceptionality of divine knowledge. A central question that emerges here is this: if status and knowledge are indeed disproportional or unrelated, why must an absolutely sovereign God also be an absolutely knowledgeable God? In other words, if someone’s position in the hierarchy of spiritual perfection were unconnected to
knowledge, how could God’s sovereignty depend on that very knowledge? These were the kinds of questions that (as we will see a little later in this chapter) emerged as objects of intense contestation over the import of Sāharanpurī’s statement cited above. Moreover, for his opponents, equally troubling as Sāharanpurī’s argument was the language in which he delivered that argument. Sāharanpurī’s rhetorical choice of drawing comparisons between the Prophet and Satan made him particularly vulnerable to the accusation that he was irreverent towards the Prophet. Another Deoband luminary whose comments on the issue of the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown made him a target of this accusation was Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī.

**Can the Prophet be called “Knower of the Unknown?”** Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī ’s Contribution to the Polemic:

Much like his senior colleague Sāharanpurī, Thānvī was also troubled by the possibility that the masses may confuse the distinction between prophetic and divine knowledge. In one of his shorter tracts entitled *Guarding the Faith (Ḥifẓ al-Īmān)*, Thānvī addressed the question of whether it was permissible to call the Prophet “knower of the unknown” (‘ālim al-ghayb). Thānvī was asked this question by a disciple seeking clarity on whether an entity that receives knowledge of the unknown through God’s mediation (bil wāṣṭa) qualified for this title. As this questioner put it, “Zayd (a hypothetical interlocutor) says that knowledge of the unknown is of two kinds: essential (bi-zāt/Ar. bi-l-dhāt) and mediated (bi-wāṣṭa/Ar. bi-l-wāṣṭa). He argues that while the first type is reserved for God, the second is available for the Prophet. Therefore, the Prophet can also be called “knower of the unknown.” Is this interpretation correct?”

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In his response, Thānvī decisively rejected the possibility that the Prophet can be called “knower of the unknown.” Thānvī argued that since God represents the sole possessor of absolute hidden knowledge, no non-divine entity, not even the Prophet, deserved this title.\textsuperscript{17} The attachment of this title on any of God’s creation, he claimed, opens the doors to polytheism. It was for the same reason, he explained, that referring to the Prophet with similar epithets like “our shepherd” (rā’īnā) and “my lord” (rabbī) was prohibited.

Thānvī further argued that apart from revelatory proofs showing the partiality of the Prophet’s knowledge, his own prophetic career attested to that. For instance, the Prophet’s use of spies and informants to gather intelligence, his lack of knowledge about the date of doomsday; all of these facts clearly demonstrated his inaccessibility to absolute hidden knowledge. Therefore, the title “knower of the unknown” was also exclusive to God and unavailable for the prophet. As a way to further punctuate his point, Thānvī offered a hypothetical analogy that generates controversy even today. He wrote:

> If one accepts that it is correct to attach the title “knower of the unknown” on the blessed being of the Prophet, then the question which must be asked is this: what kind of hidden knowledge is intended here, absolute or partial? If what is intended is partial hidden knowledge, then that is nothing specific to the Prophet. Every boy, lunatic, in fact, even every animal and beast knows something that no one else knows. Therefore, if one followed this logic, then all these entities should also be called “knower of the unknown....” And if what is intended (by this title) is absolute hidden knowledge, then that claim can be refuted through both rational and revelatory\textsuperscript{18} proofs.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{18} As an example of such revelatory proofs that demonstrated the Prophet’s inaccessibility to absolute hidden knowledge, Thānvī presented the Prophet’s declaration in the Qur’ān “Had I possessed knowledge of the unknown, I would have multiplied all good” (Qur’ān, 7:188).
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 15.
In presenting this provocative analogy, Thānvī sought to underscore the distinction between divine and prophetic authority. According to Thānvī, only God was the absolute sovereign who possessed the privilege of absolute hidden knowledge. The Prophet did not enjoy that privilege. But in presenting his point, Thānvī, much like Sāharanpūrī, adopted a rhetorical style that would haunt him and the legacy of the Deoband School for many decades. Thānvī’s comparison of the Prophet’s knowledge with that of animals, beasts, and lunatics supplied his opponents with loaded ammunition to launch the argument that the Deobandī ideology demeaned the Prophet.

In the following discussion, I show how Aḥmad Razā Khān assembled that argument by examining his refutation of Deobandī views on prophetic knowledge. As I mentioned before, the two statements by Sāharanpūrī and Thānvī, as italicized above, represented the immediate catalyst for Aḥmad Razā Khān’s judgment of anathema against the Deoband pioneers. Despite all his other disagreements with Deoband scholars, he declared them unbelievers specifically on the charge that these two statements contravened the necessities of religion.

The Perils of Satanic Theology:

In Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn, Aḥmad Razā Khān categorized Gangohī, Sāharanpūrī, and Thānvī as a group of “Satanic Wahhābīs” (Wahhābiyya Shayṭāniyya). He accused them of insulting the Prophet and glorifying Satan. He began his assault with Sāharanpūrī. For Khān, the suggestion that the Prophet, God’s most beloved subject, might possess lesser knowledge than Satan and the angel of death was unthinkable. It was not only

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20 Khān included Gangohī in this list because Sāharanpūrī wrote Conclusive Proofs at Gangohī’s behest. Gangohī had also endorsed the contents of the text. Therefore, in Khān’s opinion, although Sāharanpūrī was the apparent author, he only served as a ventriloquist for the views of his master and founder of the Deoband School, Gangohī.
Sāharanpūrī’s argument that Khān found offensive but also the way he presented that argument.

Posing provocative questions like “where is there a conclusive proof-text that establishes the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown” was an insult to the Prophet. Moreover, the act of drawing comparisons between the Prophet’s and Satan’s knowledge confirmed an attitude of complete irreverence for the sanctity of the prophetic example. Notice the combination of alarm and revulsion in Khān’s tone when he described Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī’s and his followers’ attitude towards the Prophet:

Beware O’ Muslims, beware those who believe in the Prophet. Reflect a little on what this guy (Gangohī) is claiming. He claims that he is among the loftiest of scholars and that he is a master of faith and Gnostic knowledge. He is known as the “pivot and savior of this age” among his henchmen. But look how he curses at the Prophet (kayfa yassub Muḥammadan) without any inhibition. He proudly announces his belief in the capacity of his master Satan’s knowledge. But he demands a proof-text for the knowledge of that most exalted being who God taught what he did not know, on whom God has showered his infinite grace, whose light illuminates whatever comes before him, and to whom God gifted the knowledge of the past, future, and everything that exists from East to West. What is this if not faith in Satan’s knowledge and unbelief in the knowledge of the Prophet (hal laysa hādhā īmānan bi ‘ilm iblīs wa kufr bi ‘ilm Muḥammad)? He goes at length to prove Satan’s comprehensive knowledge of what happens in the world but when someone affirms that same capacity for the Prophet, he calls it polytheism.21

Khān accused Sāharanpūrī of calling Satan more knowledgeable than the Prophet. Moreover, he argued that there was no substantive difference between calling the Prophet less knowledgeable than a non-divine entity and brazenly cursing him. In Khān’s view, Sāharanpūrī was guilty of cursing the Prophet (sabb al-rusūl). Therefore, he deserved the appropriate punishment of anathema.22

22 Ibid.
Further, according to Khān, Sāharanpūrī was as enthusiastic about establishing Satan’s capacity for knowledge as he was militant in negating that same capacity for the Prophet. While calling the Prophet’s access to knowledge of the unknown polytheism, Sāharanpūrī found nothing problematic in gifting that same access to Satan. Therefore, Khān argued, despite Sāharanpūrī’s supposed anxiety about the association of divine qualities with the Prophet, he was all too keen to establish Satan as God’s partner. Satan was the only beneficiary of such an absurd theology, Khān bemoaned. According to Khān, in one flash of rhetorical hyperbole, Sāharanpūrī had at once insulted the Prophet and exalted Satan by positioning the latter as the most worthy recipient of divine grace. In other words, Sāharanpūrī had completely inverted the logic of tradition by replacing the Prophet with Satan. Such a satanic theology could only uproot the foundations of the religion, Khān declared.  

Robbing the Prophet’s Privilege:

Khān next turned his attention to Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī. He introduced Thānvī to his Arabian interlocutors as follows:

Among the most esteemed of these Satanic Wahabbis is another of Gangohī’s henchmen (min adhnāb Gangohī), a person called Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī. In a treatise which is not more than a few pages, he says that the Prophet’s knowledge is just like that of a boy, lunatic, animal, and beast. He further argues that if someone were to claim that the Prophet possesses knowledge of the unknown, the question one must ask of that person is this: does the Prophet possess partial knowledge of the unknown or absolute? If it is partial knowledge, then that is nothing specific to the Prophet. Every boy, lunatic, in fact all animals and beasts also possess that kind of knowledge. And if one were to claim that the Prophet possesses absolute knowledge of the unknown, then this claim can be shown to be false through both rational and revelatory proofs.

24 Ibid, 27.
Khān accused Thānvī of equating (yusawī) the Prophet with animals and lunatics. As if urging his interlocutors to participate in his fury, Khān thundered, “Look how he has abandoned the Qur’ān, bid farewell to faith, and stooped to question the difference between the Prophet and an animal (unẓur kayfa taraka-l-Qur’ān wa wadda’a-l-īmān wa ‘akhadha yas’al al-farq bayna-l-nabī wa-l-haywān)”  

The simple thing that Thānvī did not consider, Khān lectured, was that the kind of hidden knowledge that all non-prophetic entities possess is merely speculative (ẓannī). Only prophets represent the true and original recipients of conclusive knowledge over hidden matters. God enables no other entity to command hidden knowledge except his favorite prophets, he emphasized. Those exalted prophets then transmit part of this knowledge to non-prophetic entities.  

Khān’s major philosophical objection against Thānvī was that he had punctured the possibility for knowledge to serve as a marker of privilege. In Khān’s view, knowledge and privilege were hierarchically organized, each reinforcing the other. An entity’s capacity for knowledge signified its rank and stature in God’s hierarchy of privilege. But Thānvī, Khān argued, had erased this correspondence between the hierarchies of knowledge and privilege. Instead, in Thānvī’s discourse, one found a bipolar division between an absolutely knowledgeable God and then all non-divine entities that were equally radically inferior to God in terms of their capacity for knowledge.  

What Thānvī did not consider, Khān continued, is that the knowledge possessed by all non-divine entities is not uniform or homogeneous. Rather, there exists a hierarchy of knowledge that clearly distinguishes more privileged entities such as prophets and saints from less privileged ones such as ordinary humans and animals. But because Thānvī

26 Ibid.
chose to ignore these distinctions and hierarchies, he found nothing repugnant in comparing the Prophet’s knowledge with that of children, lunatics, and beasts.

According to Khān, the underlying flaw in Thānvī’s conceptual apparatus was its failure to distinguish between different kinds of knowledge. More specifically, Khān argued that Thānvī had collapsed the distinction between the categories of pure knowledge of something as it exists (muṭlaq al-‘ilm) and unconditionally unrestricted knowledge (al-‘ilm al-muṭlaq).27 The first category of pure knowledge refers to the essence of something in and of itself, without any added meaning or intent. This kind of knowledge is reserved for non-divine entities including the Prophet. God gifts pure knowledge to entities among His creation in accordance with their spiritual status and privilege. On the other hand, the second category of unconditionally unrestricted knowledge represents knowledge that is beyond human fathoming. Humans cannot comprehend its size or content. It is unrestricted by any conditions. This kind of knowledge is only available for God.

Khān argued that according to Thānvī’s model, a privileged status was only available for someone who possessed knowledge of the unconditionally unrestricted variety. In other words, a privileged status was only available for an absolutely sovereign God. But Thānvī showed no regard for the hierarchy of privilege corresponding with differential capacities for pure knowledge among God’s creation. Instead, Thānvī had placed all recipients of pure knowledge on the same pedigree. Such a radically uniform understanding of pure knowledge made it impossible to distinguish the Prophet from the rest of the world.

27 Ibid.
In Khān’s view, because of his monolological conception of pure knowledge, Thānvī had erased the distinction of the Prophet. He had dispossessed the Prophet of his privilege. Thānvī’s equation of the Prophet with lunatics, animals, and beasts was an acute symptom of this deeper hermeneutical malady that afflicted his thought, Khān argued. As Khān explained:

He (Thānvī) makes no distinction between different kinds of pure knowledge; knowledge of a word or two and that which is infinite are all the same to him. He limits privilege to the possessor of unconditionally unrestricted knowledge (al-‘ilm al-muṭlaq). For him, a privileged status is only available for someone who possesses the totality of unconditionally unrestricted knowledge. (Therefore) he necessitates robbing from prophets the privilege accorded to them through pure knowledge.” ⁰²⁸

As this quote shows, in Khān’s view, Thānvī had robbed the exceptional status of the Prophet by constructing an excessively stark binary between prophetic authority and divine sovereignty. In Khān’s theological imaginary, much like Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī’s before him, divine sovereignty and prophetic privilege were mutually constituted. As a corollary, divine knowledge and prophetic knowledge, although distinct in their quantity and scope, were nonetheless part of a shared discursive venture. Khān framed the Prophet’s capacity to know the unknown as a natural corollary from godhead.

Much like the capacity for intercession, the knowledge gifted to the Prophet by God functioned as the signifier of the Prophet’s elevated and unrivaled spiritual status. The gift of knowledge distinguished the Prophet from the rest of creation. It was a sign of God’s love for his most beloved subject, the Prophet. For Khān, in clear contrast to his Deoband rivals, the Prophet was not merely a recipient of divine knowledge. He was also an active participant in that knowledge. Moreover, Khān further argued, “robbing” the

⁰²⁸ Ibid.
Prophet’s gift of knowledge of the unknown equated to denigrating the sanctity of divine knowledge itself.

In Khān’s view, when someone undermined the Prophet’s aura, he also cast an aspersion on God. God’s sovereignty and the Prophet’s vatic nobility were not mutually exclusive, as the Deobandīs had erroneously assumed. Rather, they were inseparably intertwined. As Khān poignantly wrote, “you will never see someone who detracts from Prophet Muḥammad’s glory and also exalts his Lord. By God! People who detract from the Prophet are those whom God has detracted (lā tarā abadan man yanqūṣ sha`n Muḥammad wa huwa mu’azzīmun li rabbihī...Wallāhī innama yanqūṣuhu man yanqūṣuhu rabbuhu).”

Khān considered Thānvī an exemplar of someone “who detracts from the Prophet’s glory.” For Khān, Thānvī’s hypothetical scenarios that compared the Prophet to lunatics, animals, and beasts were not just an affront to the Prophet’s persona and authority. Much more than that, such provocative comparisons threatened the very integrity of Islam. Khān explained that if one followed Thānvī’s reasoning, an unbeliever or someone hostile to Islam might apply the same logic to question the concept of divine sovereignty. Following Thānvī’s reasoning, Khān argued, it might be plausible for that unbeliever to say:

If Muslims claim that God is sovereign, then one must ask: is that sovereignty over all things or just some things. If it is only over some things, then there is nothing special about God since several other entities including humans, animals, lunatics, children, and beasts also enjoy sovereignty over some matters. And if it is said that God is sovereign over everything, this proposition can be refuted with both revelatory and rational proofs. For instance, one may then argue that since God’s being is also included in the category

29 Ibid.
“everything,” he must be subject to his own sovereignty. In that case, his sovereignty would no longer be necessary. In effect, he would no longer be God.\footnote{Ibid, 32.}

For Khān, this is the kind of doctrinal catastrophe that Thānvī’s discourse set in motion. Again, what Khān found most troubling about Thānvī’s language was the way it extended the boundaries of thinkability. As soon as a comparison between the Prophet, lunatics, and beasts became thinkable, it was only a matter of time before the very doctrinal foundations of Islam, such as the covenant of divine sovereignty, lost immunity to such scandalous comparisons. It was this deeper anxiety over salvaging the underlying foundations of religion that propelled Khān’s judgment of anathema on the Deoband pioneers.

Knowledge, Information, and the Limits of “Religion”: Manẓūr Nuʿmānī’s Rebuttal

As one might expect, Khān’s attempt to anathematize the founding scholars of Deoband did not pass unchallenged. The publication of Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn ignited a series of rebuttals and counter-rebuttals that consumed Deobandī and Barelvī scholars alike. As Usha Sanyal memorably put it, “there was a fatwa war.”\footnote{Usha Sanyal, Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his Movement, 1870-1920, (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 233.} As with any other moment in this polemic, these events are also entangled in an irresolvable web of competing narratives. According to the Barelvī narrative, the endorsement of leading Arabian scholars for Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn brought such embarrassment to the Deoband school that Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī, who was in Mecca at that time, was forced to flee back to India. On the other hand, according to the Deobandī narrative, Khān’s self-
declared triumph, one that was only achieved through blatant fabrications, was short-lived. The scholars of Hijāz had initially endorsed his epistle following the tradition of trusting a fellow scholar’s intentions and intellectual honesty. However, most of them retracted their endorsements after acquiring a more accurate understanding of Deoband scholars and their ideology. They also repudiated Khān for having misled them. I have no interest in pursuing the historicist question of “what really happened” during this episode. Instead, during the remainder of this chapter, I want to continue my analysis of the competing normativities characterizing the Deobandī and Barelvī ideologies by considering another important discursive fragment attached to this polemic, the thought of the 20th century Deoband scholar Manẓūr Nu‘mānī.

In the decades following the publication of Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn, Nu‘mānī emerged as arguably the most ardent and astute defender of the Deoband pioneers from the charge of anathema leveled against them by Aḥmad Razā Khān. Primarily a scholar of Ḥadīth, Nu‘mānī was one of the most influential and authoritative Deoband scholars in post-colonial India. Originally from Baraylī, Nu‘mānī spent most of his life in the city of Lucknow, where he also served as a distinguished instructor of Ḥadīth in the Nadwat al-‘Ulamā’ seminary, an institution with which he maintained close relations throughout his career. His most well-known publications include a four volume work on Ḥadīth called Knowledges of Ḥadīth (Ma‘ārif al-Ḥadīth) and a more introductory primer What is Islam? (Islam Kiyā Hay). Both of these books have been translated into English and are widely circulated worldwide.
Nu‘mānī also excelled as an expert debater. In 1934, 28 years after the publication of Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn, he composed a rebuttal entitled “The Decisive Polemic” (Fayṣala kūn Munāẓara). According to Nu‘mānī, he had prepared this text for an oral debate that same year in Lāhore against representatives of the Barelvī school, a debate for which the renowned Indian Muslim poet Muḥammad Iqābāl was to serve as a neutral adjudicator. In the weeks leading up to it, this debate was much touted as a decisive event that promised to resolve this dispute once and for all. “But alas the Barelvī scholars failed to show up!” Nu‘mānī sighed. He then decided to publish the remarks he had prepared for the debate in the form of a book also entitled “The Decisive Polemic.” My interest in Nu‘mānī’s rebuttal, however, does not come from the eventful circumstances of its publication.

Rather, his contribution to this polemic is instructive for how it connects the question of knowledge and its relationship to sovereignty with larger questions about the boundaries of the “religious” and the “secular” in modernity. As I will show in the following discussion, with considerable help from Nu‘mānī, at stake in the debate surrounding the Prophet’s capacity for knowledge of the unknown was the very definition of knowledge. Moreover, the labor of defining the limits of knowledge was inseparable from the task of demarcating the boundaries of religion. Encoded in this debate was the question of what did and did not count as religion. In what follows, I will develop this argument through a close reading of Nu‘mānī’s rebuttal of Ḥusām al-Ḥaramayn.

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32 Manzūr Nu‘mānī, Faysala Kūn Munāẓara (Karāchī, Dār al-ʾIshā’at, nd), 61-95.
33 Ibid, 94.
Manẓūr Nu‘mānī accused Aḥmad Razā Khān of deliberately misrepresenting Sāharanpūrī’s and Thānvī’s statements to Arab scholars not familiar with Urdū. As Nu‘mānī opined, “it seems that while writing Ḥusām al-Haramayn, Aḥmad Razā Khān had vowed to refrain from telling the truth or from showing any honesty.”

Nu‘mānī argued that Khān either willfully or unknowingly failed to consider the context of Sāharanpūrī’s and Thānvī’s remarks before passing his devastating judgment of anathema. For instance, Nu‘mānī clarified that Thānvī’s statement represented a response to the following question: is it permissible to call the Prophet “knower of the unknown” (‘ālim al-ghayb)? Thānvī was not even addressing the question of whether the Prophet possessed hidden knowledge, he stressed.

All that Thānvī was trying to show was that the Prophet cannot be accorded the title “knower of the unknown,” Nu‘mānī claimed. There is a massive difference, he continued, between the questions “does the Prophet possess knowledge of the unknown” and “can he be called knower of the unknown.” In elaborating his point, Nu‘mānī advanced the philosophical principle that the actualization of an attribute in a given entity does not make it permissible for that entity to be named after the actualized attribute. For example, he explained, God has declared himself the creator of all existence in the Qur’ān. Moreover, all Muslims must believe that everything in this world; minor or major, magnificent or trivial, are God’s creation. However, in spite of that, calling God “creator of monkeys and pigs” is impermissible. Similarly, he further explained, it is well known that the Prophet was so self-sufficient that he used to repair his own shoes, and

34 Ibid, 184.
35 See page 194.
36 Nu‘mānī, Faysala Kun Munażara (Karāchī, Dār al-Ishā’at, nd), 184.
also milk his own sheep. However, despite this empirical fact, it would be highly inappropriate to call the Prophet a “shoe-mender” (khāṣif al-naʿl) or a “sheep milker” (ḥālib al-shāṭ).

As Nuʿmānī urged his audience, “what I want readers to understand is that the debate on whether the Prophet possesses hidden knowledge or not and the question of whether the title “knower of the unknown” can be attached to his blessed being are two entirely separate issues. They are not connected.”

According to Nuʿmānī, all that Thānvī was trying to argue in Hifẓ al-Īmān was that the title “knower of the unknown” cannot be affixed to the Prophet. The Prophet cannot be called “knower of the unknown” in the same manner as he is called “seal of all prophets” (khātim al-anbīyāʾ), “master of all messengers” (sayyid al-mursalīn), “mercy for all the worlds” (raḥma lil ʿālamīn) etc. This was the case because the title “knower of the unknown” could only be attached to someone who acquired hidden knowledge without the help of an intermediary. There was no such entity other than God. Therefore, the title “knower of the unknown” was also unavailable for all non-divine entities, including the Prophet. It is in the context of this framework that Thānvī’s remarks on the Prophet’s knowledge of the unknown should be approached, Nuʿmānī explained.

The upshot of Thānvī’s discourse, Nuʿmānī elaborated, can be understood as follows: if one agrees to call the Prophet “knower of the unknown,” this could be true because of two reasons; either he has access to all unknown knowledge or to just some. The first scenario cannot be true because only God has access to absolute hidden knowledge.

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37 Ibid, 185.
38 Ibid.
And the second scenario cannot be true because even the most debase entities in the world, such as animals, beasts, and lunatics, are privileged with some forms of knowledge that are unknown to anyone else. Therefore, if one abided by the principle that access to some knowledge of the unknown qualifies an entity for the title “knower of the unknown,” then the entire world will have to be accorded that title. Moreover, Nu‘mānī inquired: how can a title that applies to everything in the world possibly exalt the stature of the Prophet? To the contrary, such a universally applicable title will only diminish the Prophet’s aura.³⁹ Nu‘mānī further explained Thānvī’s position with an instructive analogy:

Imagine a country was ruled by a king renowned for his philanthropic generosity. He feeds thousands of destitute people day and night. Now suppose some fool, say Zayd, announces that I will call this king “the sustainer” (rāziq). At this moment, another person, say ‘Umar asks Zayd the following question: when you call this king “the sustainer,” is it because he provides sustenance to the entire humanity, or because he feeds some of humanity. The first proposition is obviously false because the king clearly does not feed all human beings. And if the king is called “the sustainer” because he feeds some people, then that is nothing specific to that king. Even the laborers of a country at least feed their own children. Let alone humans, even birds feed their offspring. So if one were to extend your logic, one will have to call every laborer and bird “the sustainer.”⁴⁰

The most important thing to notice in the above analogy, Nu‘mānī emphasized, is that ‘Umar’s statement cannot be interpreted to mean that he considers the magnanimous king and every laborer or bird as equal in status or in philanthropic ability. This is exactly how Thānvī’s rejection of attaching the title “knower of the unknown” to the Prophet should be understood. He (Thānvī) never intended to compare, let alone equate, the Prophet’s knowledge with that of beasts, lunatics, and animals.

³⁹ Ibid, 185-88.
⁴⁰ Ibid, 196.
Nu‘mānī summed up the central principles undergirding Thānvī’s argument as follows: 1) only God possesses absolute knowledge of the unknown and 2) there is nothing exclusive about the Prophet’s possession of partial knowledge of the unknown. The suggestion that Thānvī declared beasts and lunatics more knowledgeable than the Prophet was solely a construction of Khān’s imagination. As Nu‘mānī chuckled, “On hearing Khān’s sensationalist interpretation of Thānvī’s otherwise clear and unambiguous statement, even Satan would hasten to seek refuge from unbelief.”

Akin to a prosecutor brandishing incriminating evidence to the jury, Nu‘mānī marshaled a number of instances in Aḥmad Razā Khān’s own writings when he had demonstrated the accessibility of some hidden knowledge to entities other than the Prophet. For example, in a collection of his edificatory discourses (malfūzāt), Khān had touted his father’s ability to foretell (peshgo ‘ī) the future as an affirmation of the latter’s spiritual achievements. Moreover, Khān had also argued that even non-humans assent to such unperceivable matters of dogma as belief in God and the finality of the Prophet. “Every tree, plant, leaf and sand dune is obligated to assent to the unity of God and the prophecy of Prophet Muḥammad. They all bear witness to Muḥammad’s prophethood and praise the divine,” Khān had declared.

In light of such statements by Khān, Nu‘mānī argued, there was no substantive difference between Thānvī’s and Khān’s positions on hidden knowledge. Both were in agreement that while absolute hidden knowledge was only available for God, partial

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41 Ibid, 188.
42 Ibid, 193.
hidden knowledge was accessible to almost all human and non-human entities. Therefore, Nu‘mānī concluded, Khān was creating the impression of a radical disagreement with Thānvī when there was none.

**Defining Knowledge and Religion: Nu‘mānī ’s Defense of Sāharanpūrī:**

Nu‘mānī also accused Khān of deliberately taking Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī’s statement out of context in a bid to make it appear scandalous. He argued that Khān was dead wrong in his assessment that Sāharanpūrī had called Satan more knowledgeable than the Prophet. Nu‘mānī explained that Sāharanpūrī was simply refuting ‘Abdul Samī’s original analogy that since even Satan possessed extensive knowledge about the physical world (‘ilm-i rū’y-i zamīn), it was inconceivable for the Prophet to not possess that knowledge.44 Sāharanpūrī, Nu‘mānī stressed, was trying to debunk the soundness of this analogy by demonstrating that just because the Prophet’s status was higher than Satan’s, it did not mean that the Prophet’s empirical knowledge of the physical world must also be greater. The critical point to remember, Nu‘mānī lectured, was that the kind of knowledge under discussion in Sāharanpūrī’s discourse was not absolute knowledge or knowledge connected to salvation and the advancement of human perfections (kamālāt-i insānī). Rather, Sāharanpūrī was only talking about knowledge of the physical world that had nothing to do with religion or salvation.45

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44 Remember, the original question from which this debate had erupted concerned the Prophet’s capacity to visit multiple venues during the *mawlid* ceremony.

45 Manẓūr Nu‘mānī, *Fayṣala Kun Munāẓara* (Karāchī, Dār al-Ishā’at, nd), 151.
Nu‘mānī further elaborated this point by positing a crucial contrast between the categories of knowledge (‘ilm) and information (ma’lūmāt). He defined knowledge as something that actively enables a subject to attain salvation and greater proximity to God. Knowledge directly relates to matters of religion. On the other hand, information is either irrelevant to salvation or may even detract from it. Most importantly, Nu‘mānī emphasized that when a person is called “more knowledgeable” (‘alam) than someone else, it is only because of the superiority of his religious or salvationally beneficial knowledge.

The acquisition of all other forms of knowledge that are unrelated to religion does not make someone more knowledgeable. It is for this reason, Nu‘mānī argued, that even if an illiterate person possessed more information about trivial and secondary events than say a Prophet, he cannot be called more knowledgeable on that account. For instance, knowledge of such things as “Sanskrit, English, geography, magic, and poetry” was mere information that had nothing to do with human perfections or religion. Nu‘mānī illustrated the distinction between knowledge and information with a set of comparisons that are quite telling of how he imagined the boundaries of religion and knowledge.

He wrote:

These days a European heretic possesses a great deal of information about material and industrial inventions (mādī awr sana‘ī ikhtarā‘āt) that the great jurists Imām Abū Ḥanīfa and Imām Mālik had never even heard of. Similarly, even the loftiest and most pious religious scholars do not have the extensive information (ma’lūmāt) about theatres and cinemas that these morally depraved and corrupt spectators (tamāshā bīn) who frequently visit such venues do. But only a fool (aḥmaq) would argue that the heretics of Europe (Europe ke mulḥīdīn) or the habitual spectators of movies at cinemas are somehow more “knowledgeable” (alam) than Imām Abū Ḥanīfa, Imām Mālik, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī or any other esteemed religious scholar.\(^{46}\)

\(^{46}\)Ibid, 185.
The quote above provides important clues about Nu‘mānī’s social imaginary. Nu‘mānī’s example of “corrupt cinema spectators” captures his dissatisfaction with the moral economy he found around him. In his view, Indian Muslims in his time had become so enamored by trivial and harmful secular activities that they had lost any connection with Islam and its intellectual heritage. Moreover, in Nu‘mānī’s discourse, we also find a bifurcated division between a sacred and a profane world.

The sacred world was populated by people of religion such as leading scholars of the tradition. On the other hand, the profane world was infested with modern contaminations like European industrial inventions, knowledge of “un-Islamic” languages such as English and Sanskrit, the proliferation of theatres and cinemas in the public sphere, and so on. In Nu‘mānī’s social imaginary, the division between knowledge and information corresponded with a larger boundary between sacred and profane spheres of thought, practice, and public life.

Most importantly, the construction of this binary between sacred and profane worlds was intimately connected to Nu‘mānī’s argument that the Prophet’s lack of knowledge about the physical secular world did not in any way undermine his status. The Prophet’s status as a perfect human being depended on the capaciousness of his sacred religious knowledge. The Prophet’s status had no relation to the kind of profane secular information that consumed people of questionable moral character.

In Nu‘mānī’s view, the exclusivity of the Prophet’s status depended solely on knowledge connected to human perfections and religion. Therefore, the Prophet’s ignorance about particular events in the world did not undermine his perfection and status. There was no example, Nu‘mānī argued, that better demonstrated this point than
the Prophet’s own life. The Prophet had himself declared his followers as more knowledgeable about their personal matters than him when he said, “you know better the affairs of your worldly lives (antum ‘alam bi amr dunyā-kum).”

Moreover, during the Prophet’s life, he had no knowledge about several secondary events that took place around him. For example, during his tenure in Medina, he mistook many hypocrites for good believers. It was only through revelation that he eventually became aware of these hypocrites’ true intentions.\(^{47}\) Similarly, Nu’mānī reasoned, the Qur’ān declares, “we did not teach (the Prophet) poetry and nor is it necessary for him.”\(^{48}\) It is obvious from this verse, Nu’mānī claimed, that the Prophet was not taught poetry, despite the fact that several unbelievers and “morally depraved people” had mastered the art of poetry. But knowledge of poetry did not make them more knowledgeable. It simply added to their acquisition of trivial information.

As Nu’mānī put it:

Amr al-Qays was the worst kind of unbeliever but he was also a renowned poet. Firdawsī was a morally corrupt Shi’a. However, he was among the most accomplished of Persian poets. But one cannot extrapolate that since even unbelieving and immoral people like Amr al-Qays and Firdawsī excelled in poetry, so must have the Prophet….In fact, if knowledge of poetry was in any way related to status and moral superiority, then every pious Muslim should be a better poet than Amr al-Qays and Firdawsī.\(^{49}\)

This distinction between religious knowledge and secular information was also central to how Nu’mānī defended Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī from the accusation that the latter had called Satan more knowledgeable than the Prophet. Sāharanpūrī’s argument was exactly to the contrary of this accusation, Nu’mānī claimed. According to Nu’mānī,

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 182. Nu’mānī cited the verse in the Qur’ān “Certain of the desert Arabs round about you are hypocrites, as well as (desert Arabs) among the Medina folk: they are obstinate in hypocrisy: thou knowest them not.” Qur’ān, 9:101.

\(^{48}\) Qur’ān, 36:69.

\(^{49}\) Ibid, 153.
Sāharanpūrī had in fact argued for a radical difference between the Prophet’s unrivaled knowledge of religion and Satan’s mastery over profane worldly information.

As Nu’mānī explained:

Indeed, God has granted Satan all the resources of information that he might need to misguide humans and to test their faith. For instance, Satan should be familiar with human desires and temperaments so he may exploit them. He should know that in so and so place a vulgar dance gathering is taking place so he may tempt vulnerable youth to go there and engage in debauchery. Satan requires extensive information about the lowly affairs of the world to fulfill his satanic goals. But prophets and other beings dear to God have nothing to do with such trivial and uncouth information. Their job is not misguidance but guidance and moral instruction. Therefore, God has gifted them an unlimited abundance of knowledge suited for that task.\(^{50}\)

Here one can see how Nu’mānī defended Sāharanpūrī by constructing a binary between “religious knowledge” and “profane information.” According to Nu’mānī, when Sāharanpurī had said that Satan’s knowledge of the physical world was greater than the Prophet’s, he was only referring to the kind of secular profane information that religious people had nothing to do with. In fact, people of religion, most prominently the Prophet, would strive to keep away from that kind of information and from the spheres of mental and physical activity that it encompassed. Therefore, contrary to Khān’s accusation that Sāharanpūrī had demeaned the Prophet by calling him less knowledgeable than Satan, Sāharanpūrī had in fact established the absolute superiority of the Prophet’s religious knowledge over Satan’s capacity for secular profane information.

To sum up, Nu’mānī’s argument pivoted on the claim that the Prophet’s knowledge of matters unrelated to salvation and the advancement of human perfections may well be less than that of a non-Prophet, an unbeliever, or even Satan. However, a deficit in knowledge of worldly affairs and events in no way undercuts the Prophet’s status as the

\[^{50}\text{Ibid, 159.}\]
most knowledgeable being. Khān had failed to consider this basic principle before accusing Sāharanpūrī of calling Satan more knowledgeable than the Prophet, Nu‘mānī concluded.

What interests me most about Nu‘mānī’s argument is the conception of knowledge and religion that it articulated and on which it rested. In Nu‘mānī’s imaginary, the definition of knowledge was restricted to “religious knowledge.” More precisely, religious knowledge represented those forms of knowledge that God had deemed necessary for salvation. For instance, these included the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, and the Sharī’a more broadly, though he did not provide an explicit list of disciplines that counted as “religious.” However, what I wish to emphasize is that Nu‘mānī’s exercise of consciously defining knowledge also involved an exercise of defining the boundaries of religion.

The sovereign decision on what counted as knowledge also represented a sovereign decision on what did and did not count as religion. Moreover, this exercise of defining the proper limits of knowledge and religion produced a remarkably constricted conception of both. For instance, consider the way Nu‘mānī compared the knowledge of prominent premodern Muslim jurists with that of scholars from other disciplines in the tradition. He wrote:

Imām Abū Ḥanīfa had mastered millions of disciplines connected to the Sharī’a. In comparison, although Ibn Rushd (d.1198) was also a fairly accomplished scholar of the Sharī’a, his knowledge was not even one-tenth that of Abū Ḥanīfa’s. On the other hand, Ibn Rushd’s information (emphasis mine) about Greek philosophy was certainly far superior because Greek philosophy had not been translated into Arabic during Abū Ḥanīfa’s life. However, on that basis, one cannot call Ibn Rushd more knowledgeable than Abū Ḥanīfa. Similarly, despite their wealth of knowledge about the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth, Imām Bukhārī (d.870) and Imām Muslim (d.875) did not have as much information (emphasis mine) about history as did Ibn Khaldūn (d.1406) and Ibn Khālikān (d.1282). But Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn Khālikān, or for that matter any contemporary
historian, cannot be called more knowledgeable than these (Bukhārī and Muslim) luminaries of the religion.\textsuperscript{51}

Nu‘mānī’s privileging of knowledge over information was authorized by a discursive program of controlling the limits of knowledge that counted as “religious.” In defining “religious knowledge,” he excluded history, philosophy, poetry, and a range of other disciplines from the domain of religion. For Nu‘mānī, these knowledge traditions were mere information. They were inconsequential, if not detrimental, to a subject’s salvational goals. In Nu‘mānī’s discourse, the boundaries of knowledge and religion were mutually, indeed simultaneously, constructed. Each enabled the other in the instant of the decision on what counted as knowledge and religion. Most importantly, for Nu‘mānī, both knowledge and religion were readily available for division, definition, representation, and translation.

Life was readily available for the sovereign operation of separating religion from the non-religious and knowledge from information. Ultimately, it was Nu‘mānī, who as the sovereign jurist decided the definition of knowledge, and by extension, that of religion. As shown in the quote just cited, his sovereign decision produced a remarkably reified understanding of religion, one that was confined to law. Law and religion were rendered synonymous. There was nothing more to religion than law. There was nothing more to knowledge than knowledge of the law. All else was secular information.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 150.
Nu‘mānī’s discursive paradigm was paradoxical in many ways. Even as he strived to secure the primacy of knowledge that was “truly religious,” his project was driven by the modern secular promise of dividing life into readily available compartments like religion/non-religion and knowledge/information. The subject, according to this modern imaginary, does not only live life within its limits. Empowered by the sovereign power of decision, he decides on the limits of life. The question of the boundaries separating the religious from the secular or knowledge from information was no longer subject to uncertainty and doubt. Instead, these boundaries were nestled in the corridors of decidability, always available for translation, representation, and decision.

Seemingly, Nu‘mānī’s discourse was restricted to a debate over the character and limits of Prophet Muhammad’s knowledge of the unknown. However, as I have shown, at the heart of his argument was a much more radical outcome; a sovereign decision on what did and did not count as religion. The site on which he issued that decision was knowledge. The limits of knowledge symmetrically corresponded with the limits of religion. The moment of distinguishing knowledge from information was also the moment of defining the location of religion.

In short, Nu‘mānī’s discourse on the relationship between knowledge and prophetic status was inextricable to a politics of religion making invested in demarcating the ideological boundaries of what counted as religion. Moreover, as Nu‘mānī objectified the limits of religion, he also objectified the Prophet’s knowledge and in effect, the imaginary of the Prophet as a font of normative guidance. By religionizing religion, Nu‘mānī also religionized the Prophet.
Conclusion:

The controversy generated by Thānvī’s and Sāharanpūrī’s remarks about prophetic knowledge clearly shows the opposing points of emphasis characterizing Deobandī and Barelvī understandings of tradition. For each, the other was heretical. In Aḥmad Razā Khān’s view, the pioneers of Deoband were insulting the Prophet’s aura to make obscure and untenable arguments. More seriously, he anathematized them for violating the religious necessity to honor the Prophet. In turn, both early and later Deoband scholars such as Manẓūr Nu’mānī accused Khān of manufacturing baseless allegations by deliberately falsifying their arguments. More substantively, they also accused Khān of undermining God’s sovereignty under the pretense of venerating the Prophet. As Rashīd Aḥmad Gangoḥī once commented, “They diminish God’s majesty and give it the name “love for God’s Prophet” (Ḥaqq-i taʿāla kā shān ghatātay hayn aur iss kā nām ḥubb-i rasūl Allah rakhtay hayn)”.52 For both Aḥmad Razā Khān and his Deoband rivals, knowledge and sovereignty were intimately intertwined. However, the ways in which they understood that relationship and mobilized it for their programs of religious reform was radically opposed.

But from the preceding analysis of this polemic, one can also conclude that Aḥmad Razā Khān and his Deoband rivals were in many ways talking past each other. Substantively, notwithstanding their disagreements, their theological ideas also overlapped in significant ways. Both agreed that absolute hidden knowledge was only available for God. They also agreed that God gifts part of that knowledge to non-divine entities including the Prophet. Moreover, theoretically, Khān would have agreed with

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Thānvī that the title “knower of the unknown” was inapplicable to the Prophet if it meant that the possessor of absolute knowledge of the unknown. In light of these observable yet unacknowledged points of agreement, one may ask: what was this polemic really about? What was at stake for its participants?

One may respond to these questions by noting that this polemic had as much to do with the etiquette of talking about the Prophet as with competing visions of his authority. For Khān, the way in which Deoband scholars talked about the Prophet was unnecessarily provocative and outright offensive. Even if their arguments had been logically consistent, the manner in which they articulated those arguments was reprehensible. In Khān’s view, through their unabashed comparison of the Prophet with Satan, lunatics, and beasts, his Deoband rivals were making a complete parody of religion. As I have argued in this chapter, Khān found such comparisons and hypothetical scenarios an imminent threat to tradition because they stretched the limits of thinkability in alarming ways. On the other hand, for the pioneers of Deoband, taking some discursive gambles to secure the primacy of divine sovereignty was fair game. The urgency of the situation required some degree of discursive flair.

Ultimately, the polemical moment described in this dissertation brought into central view two competing imaginaries of the moral goods most integral to the coherence of a tradition. Moreover, it was within a contingent conjuncture of antagonistic activity that Aḥmad Razā Khān and the pioneers of Deoband fought out and made centrally visible their opposing views on the limits of tradition. It was precisely by working through and against opposing arguments that the identities of these two schools took discursive shape. Identity and difference were mutually constituted in the moment of their encounter.
Therefore, one could not have entered into this polemic armed with a priori conceptions of what counted as Islam.

Rather, the specific questions about the limits of Islam and the answers provided to them were produced within the antagonistic space of this polemic. The pioneers of both the Barelvi and Deobandi schools articulated competing visions of what they considered normatively coherent programs of tradition and reform. Their rival narratives of tradition cannot be conceptualized through such binaries as law/Sufism, reformist/non-reformist, or traditionalist/modernist. These binaries canonize the ideological horizons of native discourses on the limits of tradition and reform prior to the contingent conjunctures of debates in which those limits become centrally visible. Instead, this polemic demands an analytical approach centered not on the empiricist question of who won and who lost but on the political question of how and through what kinds of discursive and non-discursive relations, claims about the scope and boundaries of tradition were made, put on display, and battled out.
Conclusion: Indian Muslim Reform and the Question of Disenchantment

In his book *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, the renowned social historian Francis Robinson provocatively argued that Muslim reform movements in colonial India heralded an unprecedented era of Weberian secularization and disenchantment in South Asian Islam.\(^1\) Robinson’s argument was based on his observation that akin to Protestant Christianity, reformist ideologies such as Deoband ushered a more scriptural understanding of Islam to the salvational conscience of South Asian Muslims; one that restricted the sources of moral guidance in the religion to the *Qur’ān* and *Ḥadīth*. Also, that these reformist movements at times vehemently opposed certain Sufi practices like listening to music as a meditation exercise, or other popular conventions like celebrating the Prophet’s birthday signified for Robinson their commitment to a disenchanted and privatized imaginary of Islam. Moreover, in Robinson’s view, the polemics between reformist ideologies such as the Deobandīs and the Barelvīs constitute a battle between disenchanted and enchanted expressions of Islamic normativity.

The gist of Robinson’s argument is best captured when he wrote, “These puritan Muslims began to dispense with the great network of saints and ancestors through whom they once came close to God…These Muslims increasingly seemed to find the world a cold, bleak, disenchanted place.”\(^2\) He went on to opine that Indian Madrasas like Deoband “produced a dwindling stream, relatively at least, of *turbaned graduates* able to see the world only through the *prism of revelation* (emphases mine).”\(^3\)

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\(^2\) Ibid, 127.
\(^3\) Ibid, 125.
Robinson’s comments point to an important problem in the historiography of Muslim reform in colonial India—namely, the politics of conceptualizing reform as equivalent to the secularization and disenchantment of religious identities. In these concluding remarks, by way of engaging with and responding to Robinson’s argument, I want to explicate the theoretical contribution of this dissertation.

Robinson is correct that certain strands of Muslim reformist thought in British India were staunchly opposed to the domination of saints and shrines on the moral psychology of the masses. Certainly, thinkers like Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī and Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī displayed a general attitude of suspicion towards certain manifestations of Sufism in ritual practice. Moreover, as I argued in chapter 2, it is also correct that the cultivation of sobriety and the containment of human passion were central features of the Deoband reform project. However, all that said, to interpret the ideology of reform movements like Deoband as an argument for a disenchanted Islam is highly problematic for multiple reasons.

First, Robinson’s claim that major South Asian Muslim reformers such as the founders of Deoband subscribed to a disenchanted view of Islam needs to be more critically probed. It is true that Deoband thinkers objected to practices that in their view generated excessive passion (such as listening to music.) However, even the most conservative of Deoband scholars did not reject the existence of miracles, jinns, and other such supernatural elements of existence that are incompatible to a modern scientific rationality. Moreover, Deobandī discourses are also populated by the narration of dreams, frequently deployed as a strategy of constructing or defending a prominent thinker’s
religious authority. Dreams are also narrated to establish the supremacy of an ideological school over its competitors. For example, in his well-known polemical text *The Conclusive Proofs* (discussed earlier), the prominent Deoband scholar Khalīl Aḥmad Sāharanpūrī narrated a story in which the Prophet appears in a Deobandī scholar’s dream (the name of the scholar is unspecified) and begins speaking to him in Urdū. Obviously bewildered, this scholar asks the Prophet, “Sir, I thought you were an Arab, how is it that you are speaking in Urdū?” The Prophet responded, “I have learnt this language because of my profound relationship with the ‘ulamā’ of Deoband.” In addition to the strategic *Indianization* of the Prophet, this narrative also underscores the significance of dreams to Deobandī discourses. Indeed, the oneiric imagination was central to the intellectual careers of prominent Indian Muslim reformers, including those affiliated with Deoband. This hardly affirms the view that sees them as staunch rationalists who “found the world a cold, bleak disenchanted place.”

The crux of the problem associated with Robinson’s Weberian reading of Indian Muslim reform is best uncovered by turning to one of Weber’s most astute readers, the philosopher/sociologist Charles Taylor. In his classic *The Sources of the Self* (a majestic work on various sources of norms in modern Western thought), Taylor posited a useful distinction between what he called “constitutive goods” and “life goods.” For Taylor, constitutive goods represent the background pictures or the “moral and spiritual intuitions” that determine the way in which a subject articulates and chooses the moral

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4 See for example the narratives contained in such hagiographic texts as Ashraf Āli Thānvī’s *Arvāḥ-yi Salāsa* or the historian Manazir Ahsan Gilani’s 3 volume intellectual biography of one of Deoband’s founders Qāsim Nānautvī entitled *Savānīḥ-yi Qāsimī*, among several other texts.


6 Ibid.
good over a set of competing choices. On the other hand, life goods signify the actual practices and modes of being that a subject enacts in affirming the constitutive goods that underlie them. However, Taylor was explicit in his warning that the relationship between the higher-order constitutive goods and the life-goods that result from them is never linear or absolute. For example, in his analysis of Taylor’s thought, critic and scholar of religion David Kim explained, “The good life regulated by an ethic of benevolence within a theistic worldview will not be identical with the same conception of the good life organized around a secular version of human flourishing.”

Robinson’s theory of associating the intellectual project of Deobandī reformers with the articulation of a disenchanted Islam collapses the pivotal distinction between constitutive and life goods. For instance, just because Deoband scholars repudiated practices like celebrating the Prophet’s birthday does not mean that they subscribed to the constitutive good of disenchantment and the secularization of religious identities. The logic of the life goods they articulated and argued for was completely different; it was internal to their discourse.

As I argued in chapter 2, the Deobandī critique of certain popular devotional practices was driven by the desire to restore the primacy of divine sovereignty in the religious imagination of the masses. The Deoband pioneers were most troubled by the confusion of non-obligatory practices for divinely obligated acts. Therefore, by thoroughly reforming the public sphere, they sought to harmonize the normative expectations of divine law with the performance of everyday life. And as we saw in chapter 3, Aḥmad Razā Khān

refuted the Deoband reform project by arguing that forbidding the masses from practices that exalted the Prophet was itself heretical. In Khān’s view, the Deoband scholars were transgressing their juridical authority by outlawing pious conventions that God had not outlawed. Moreover, in doing so, they were opposing the example of prominent past scholars who never found such conventions problematic. The point that must be emphasized here is this: these rival narratives of tradition and reform had nothing to do with the desire to enchant or disenchant the Indian public sphere. The binary of enchantment/disenchantment, much like its twin tradition/modernity, is a vacuous Western construction that cannot attend to the task of conceptualizing native debates on the limits of tradition.

Finally, Robinson’s assertion that Deoband scholars were “puritan turbaned graduates who dispensed with the great network of saints (in South Asia)…and who were only able to see the world through the prism of revelation” deserves some attention. Leaving aside its pejorative overtones, the deeper problem with Robinson’s description is the way it perpetuates the binary of law/revelation and Sufism. According to Robinson, the narrative of Muslim reform in colonial India was one marked by the valorization of Islamic law over Sufism. In this view, Muslim reformers like Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl and the Deoband pioneers systematically castrated the Sufi heritage of South Asian Islam. In its place, they advanced a puritan religious sensibility entirely hostile to any expression of mysticism. Moreover, under this framework, scholars who opposed such a puritan Islam, like Aḥmad Razā Khān, represent the defenders of popular Sufi practices from the assault of ultra rationalist jurists. The saga of this antagonism, in effect, is conceptualized as an innate contestation between legal rationalism and mystical
enchantment. This kind of a conceptual approach is unhelpful and inaccurate. On a very basic level, it belies the fact that both the Deoband pioneers and their Barelvi antagonists were some of the most influential jurists and Sufi masters in modern South Asia.

But the more crucial theoretical problem that generates such dichotomous representations of religious identities is the ascription of contemporary categories such as “law” and “mysticism” onto historical subjects who did not live out their lives under the confines of such neat binaries. The intellectual careers of these thinkers resist such monological representations. Their discourses on questions of law, ethics, and theology demonstrate a remarkable ability to engage in multiple logoi (heterologies)9 and modes of reasoning simultaneously. For example, once when asked about the relationship between law and Sufism, Thānvī responded, “I trust the judgment of legal scholars more in matters of ethical practice, but this decision of mine is based purely on the intellect because on an instinctive level, I am in love with the ways of the Sufis.”10

Similarly, contrary to his popular image, Aḥmad Razā Khān was no antinomian Sufi. In fact, he was harshly critical of the tendency to bypass the authority of traditionally trained jurists by considering them secondary to or less important than charismatic Sufi masters. In a remarkable text entitled “Affirmations of the Mystics for the Nobility of the Law of the Jurists” (Maqāl-i ‘Urafā’ fi I’zāz-i Shar‘-i ‘Ulamā‘)11, Khān marshaled a number of quotations from prominent pre-modern Sufi masters (most notably ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī) that denied the possibility of accessing mystical truth without a firm grounding in the ethical teachings of law.

9 I have borrowed this term from Michel de Certeau’s book Heterologies: Discourses on the Other (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 215.
Therefore, despite all their differences, for both Khān and Thānvī, law and Sufism were part of a common ethical program that was unavailable for division into oppositional binaries. Approaching their rivalry through the prism of such binary constructions as mysticism/rationalism, enchantment/disenchantment, tradition/modernity, and traditionalist/reformist will not yield any analytical purchase.

In this dissertation, I have argued that such rivalries should instead be approached as a contestation between competing rationalities of tradition and reform. These rationalities become centrally visible during specific conjunctures of adversarial activity in which the limits of the normative and the heretical, identity and difference, are authoritatively debated. Each chapter in this dissertation has shown ways in which authoritative religious actors sought to strategically control the boundaries of tradition. By focusing on a specific context of antagonism in 19th century Muslim India, I have described two opposing narratives of the relationship between divine sovereignty, prophetic charisma, and the boundaries of normative practice. The protagonists of these narratives assembled their religious authority by identifying an object of dissatisfaction and then proposing a program of reform to overcome that dissatisfaction.

Shāh Muḥammad Ismāʿīl and the Deoband pioneers crafted as their object of critique prevalent attitudes and practices dominant in the public sphere that in their view posed an imminent threat to divine sovereignty. As an antidote, they advanced a reform project that called for the abandonment of such practices as a way to restore the radical alterity of divine sovereignty. They also argued for an imaginary of the Prophet that emphasized his humanity as the marker of his perfection. On the other hand, it was precisely such a notion of reform that constituted the dissatisfaction that Fazl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī and later
Ahmad Razā Khān sought to overcome. They vigorously defended long-running rituals and devotional practices that in their view were indispensable from the fabric of tradition. Moreover, they claimed that the Prophet’s exceptionality, as affirmed through such qualities as his unrivaled capacity for intercession or his access to knowledge of the unknown, was non-negotiable. In fact, the exceptionality of divine sovereignty was established precisely through the affirmation of the Prophet’s ontological exceptionality. Divine sovereignty and prophetic charisma were inseparable. To sum up, this dissertation has argued that these rival narratives of tradition and reform in 19th century Muslim India were animated by competing political theologies that corresponded with competing understandings of law and normative practice in everyday life.

**Theoretical Intervention: Shifting the Camera to Native Discursive Archives**

In their recent volume, *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, Carl Ernst and Richard Martin posed the following question to scholars of Islam: “by what methods and theories will you explain and interpret Islamic social and textual data to other scholars in religious and in cultural studies who are not specialists in your field?”12 This dissertation has tried to address this question by engaging certain authoritative textual traditions from 19th century Muslim India with the work of a range of post-colonial theorists from varying disciplinary persuasions. It has examined competing arguments on the limits of tradition in a way that makes visible the deeper understandings of such concepts as sovereignty, knowledge, law, temporality, and history that inspired those arguments. This has involved an exercise in asking of authoritative religious actors from the past questions they would not have asked of

themselves, of connecting their arguments with larger themes external to the ideological problem-space in which those arguments emerged. Such a dialogical conversation between Western theory and native discourse opens the possibility of a mutual contamination that offers new ways of approaching these seemingly disparate knowledge traditions.

However, here one might add that in addition to theorizing native textual and social data through the conceptual tools of Western philosophical and post-colonial thought, it is also important to consider the limits of those tools. The labor of “rethinking Islamic Studies” must also be attuned to the politics of theory that privileges certain kinds of discourses, questions, and objects of critique over others. Take for instance the field of religion studies. In the last few decades, several important theoretical works in the Western academic study of religion have sought to critique the universality of liberal secular modernity. In different ways, these works have shown that the category of “religion” cannot be treated as a culturally universal construct. Rather, religion is a relatively recent invention that emerged during the 19th century and that is inseparable from the story of Western colonialism and modernity.13

This growing field of post-secular critiques of the secular has been particularly inspired by the scholarship of the anthropologist Talal Asad. For almost two decades now, Asad has been at the forefront of an intellectual movement that has sharply questioned the assumed separation of the religious and the secular. Far from representing distinct discursive domains, “religion” and “secularism,” Asad argued, were mutually dependent. One of his clearest articulations of this argument is found in an insightful critique of Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s views on religion where Asad wrote:

I would urge that “religion” is a modern concept not because it is reified but because it has been linked to its Siamese twin “secularism.” Religion has been part of the restructuration of practical times and spaces, a rearticulation of practical knowledges and powers, of subjective behaviors, sensibilities, needs, and expectations in modernity. But that applies equally to secularism, whose function has been to try to guide that rearticulation and to define “religions” in the plural as a species of (non-rational) belief.¹⁴

In Asad’s view, much like any religion, secularism also normalizes itself by valorizing certain virtues, rituals, and forms of embodiment that seek to cultivate particular kinds of subjects and affective possibilities. Most importantly, for Asad, secular assumptions about the proper role of religion in society and the political rationality that authorizes those assumptions are anything but universal. Rather, like any ideological construct, the secular is also contingently authorized in arbitrary conjunctures of specific historical, institutional, and discursive forces.¹⁵

Inextricable to Asad’s project of destabilizing the moral and political language of secular modernity is his argument about the unavailability of religion for universal definition, an argument most clearly articulated in his earlier work *Genealogies of Religion*. Through a sustained critique of anthropological attempts to define religion, Asad argued “that the very process of offering definitions of religion as a universal category has roots in a Christian history, a modern Christian history in which “belief” is given a unique place, and which is at the same time a history of comparative religion as an intellectual subject.”  

As he memorably wrote, “My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.” One can only recognize the validity of this argument.

Indeed, Asad’s genealogical critiques of secular modernity have done much to interrupt its messianic and self-congratulatory claims to transcendence. They have also disrupted the often assumed universality of such liberal virtues as individual sovereignty, freedom, the separation of religion and politics, and so on. But Asad is primarily interested in the secular politics of regulation through which the boundaries of religion are constantly redefined and disturbed. The central problem that captivates his inquiry relates to the secular conditions of possibility for the constitution of religion as a category of life. His main focus is on authoritative modern knowledges about religion, especially Islam. However, he is much less attentive to authoritative contestations within Islam over

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its normative boundaries. His critique of the secular fails to wrestle with the question of religion in a way that brings into view native debates and antagonisms on the limits of life, identity, and difference. In this dissertation, I have attempted such a task.

Conceptually, I have tried to shift the camera of inquiry from secular colonial regimes of religion-making to critical conjunctures of native discourses and debates on the boundaries of tradition. This conceptual positioning is not meant to undermine the significance of the colonial discursive economy in the construction of communal and religious identities. Indeed, the colonial event in India served as the very condition of possibility for the efflorescence of native reform movements. However, a more complete picture of the contested terrain in which religious identities were negotiated in colonial India (and elsewhere) can only emerge through a closer investigation into native traditions of moral arguments.

As long as the specter of the secular continues to colonize academic frameworks of analysis, critical sites of native discourses on the limits of religion and difference will remain unattended. This absence is not only problematic in and of itself. More importantly, the implication of this absence is that only the colonial secular West demands rigorous academic theorization and critique. On the other hand, the thought of native religious actors is neither worthy of theory nor properly theoretical on its own.

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18 This is a curious absence in Asad’s work since in his influential 1986 article “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” he had proposed the felicitous suggestion of approaching Islam as a “discursive tradition;” a concept that attends to discourses and practices of argumentation through which practitioners of a tradition distinguish correct actions from incorrect ones. However, such traditions of internal contestations over the normative boundaries of Islam are not provided much coverage in Asad’s scholarly oeuvre.
Concomitantly, as a consequence of this logic, the domain of religion/the study of religious texts are conveniently outsourced as the prerogative of philologically oriented area-studies specialists. Therefore, quite ironically, post-colonial theoretical attempts to dissolve the assumed separation of religion and the secular remain mired in a politics of theory that perpetuates that very separation. According to this politics, the labor of theory is reserved for exposing the religious underpinnings of the secular or the contingency of colonial power. Meanwhile, such theoretical enterprises remain aloof of native scholarly discourses on religion and its boundaries. Curiously, such compartmentalization replicates the very politics of colonial secularity that theory strives to critique. And it is precisely this unresolved tension within theory that explains its often uneasy relationship with religious discourses and texts.

**Redefining the Subaltern:**

A similar reluctance to engage with native religious discourses and texts is also evident in what is arguably the most influential school of historiography in modern South Asian studies, the subaltern studies school. The subaltern studies school was initiated in 1982 by a group of scholars of South Asia (mostly historians) trained in the Euro-American academy. Inspired by the thought of the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, these scholars tried to interrupt the coherency of colonial and nationalist historiographies on South Asia.19

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19 For an excellent overview of the political project of the subaltern studies collective and a response to some of the criticisms against it, see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay “A Small History of Subaltern Studies” in his *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002).
The subaltern studies collective sought to make centrally visible the untold contributions of India’s marginalized/subaltern groups, such as the peasantry, in the country’s social and political history. These contributions, they argued, had been left out by nationalist histories of India’s past and present that were monopolized by the political consciousness of colonial and post-colonial elites. As historian Ranajit Guha, the founder of the Subaltern Studies School wrote in a statement that inaugurated the series, “We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography…for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the marker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project.”\textsuperscript{20}

Broadly speaking, the political project of the subaltern studies school was to poach the hegemony of Indian nationalism by exposing the contingency of its narrative frame. Through intensive micro-studies of colonial and nationalist discourses on such phenomena as communalism, caste, and violence, subaltern studies scholars showed the indelible vestiges of colonial politics on the ideological apparatuses of the post-colonial Indian state. Moreover, one of the central theoretical contributions of the Subaltern Studies collective was the way it reconfigured the very category of the \textit{political} in relation to the study of Indian history. Subaltern Studies scholars, especially Ranajit Guha, sharply critiqued the tendency in European and nationalist historiographies to equate the political domain with the institutions and structures of governance associated with the colonial state.

\textsuperscript{20} Ranajit Guha, Preface to Subaltern Studies 3: Writings on Indian History and Society, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 7.
As Guha put it:

In all writings of this kind [i.e., elitist historiography] the parameters of Indian politics are assumed to be or enunciated as those of the institutions introduced by the British for the government of the country…[Elitist historians] can do no more that equate politics with the aggregation of activities and ideas of those who were directly involved in operating these institutions, that is, the colonial rulers and their eleves-the dominant groups in native society.21

Subaltern studies scholars tried to correct this situation by shifting the focus of attention to moments of political mobilization driven by the subaltern classes of society, defined as the “demographic difference between the total Indian population and the dominant indigenous and foreign elite.”22 The case of peasant revolts in colonial India, organized on the basis of such non-state variables as kinship, caste, and territory, represented a classic example of such subaltern politics. The varied and extensive studies that emerged from the Subaltern Studies initiative have greatly enriched our understanding not only of Indian society but also of the intricate workings of nationalist ideologies more generally. It is therefore not surprising that most scholars attached to this collective have also been some of the leading voices in the field of post-colonial theory.

However, one finds a curious absence or at least a serious lack of attention in the work of subaltern studies scholars on the question of religion. While these scholars have had much to say about colonial and nationalist constructions of socio-political categories (such as communalism, caste etc.), their engagement with native discourses on religion

and its limits has been remarkably thin. Part of this lacuna might be explained by how the subaltern was defined as non-elite members of society who did not write and leave behind their own histories.\(^{23}\)

Under this definition, the learned scholars of any religious tradition would not count as subaltern. But if subalternity were conceived as the condition of being excluded from dominant historiographies, then members of the native religious elite, such as traditional Muslim scholars in colonial India, were also subaltern (even though they would not have thought of themselves as such). They wrote copiously but the archive of their thought remains largely confined to those internal to the tradition. However, such archives of native religious discourses remained largely peripheral to if not entirely absent from the purview of subaltern studies.

**Decolonizing the Colonial:**

The question of how the experience of British colonialism transformed religion in South Asia has dominated the problem-space of South Asian studies. Scholars have responded to this question in varied ways. At the risk of some simplification, these responses range from ‘the category of religion is itself a colonial construction’\(^{24}\) to ‘religion may have existed before the onset of colonialism but was no longer imagined

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\(^{23}\) As Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented, “Peasants do not speak directly in archival documents, which are usually produced by ruling classes.” Ibid, 15.

the same way afterwards to ‘the shift from the pre-colonial to the colonial represents more of a continuity than a rupture in how communities imagined their religious identities.’

In relation to native reform movements in colonial India, much of the scholarship in the field has been informed by the first position, the one that emphasizes the specificity and rupture of colonialism. In several important studies inspired by varied strands of post-colonial theory, one finds a tendency to view native projects of religious reform as a product of and a reaction to British colonialism. Scholars of South Asian religions such as Arvind Mandair, Harjot Oberoi, and Vasudha Dalmia have in their own ways argued that the emergence of native reform movements in the region represented a response to the dominant colonial episteme. The most ambitious recent attempt at an argument of this sort is Arvind Mandair’s “Religion and the Specter of the West.” In what follows, through a brief engagement with Mandair’s work, I want to highlight some of the problems attached to a theoretical approach that views native religious reform as a reaction to colonialism. Moreover, I wish to explicate the limitations of this approach in conceptualizing the landscape of Muslim reform described in this dissertation.

The underlying theme that animates Mandair’s multi-layered work is that of translation. In his book, he wrestles with the contradiction that although there is no equivalent for the word “religion” in Indic languages, most post-colonial South Asians today readily translate their identities in religious terms, and abide by the view that they have always had something called “religion.”

He asks how the “religio” became perfectly translatable for South Asians, especially for Sikhs, whose narrative forms the focus of his book. Among other things, Mandair attributes this development to the work of important Sikh reformers in colonial India who formed such reformist groups as the Singh Sabha during the late 19th century. Educated in urban colonial institutions of learning, these native reformers transformed Sikh consciousness. They introduced to the tradition a colonially inspired hermeneutic whereby a religion was only counted as such if it was centered on the figure of a sovereign transcendent God.

These reformers were driven by the anxiety to prove that Sikhism was an independent world religion. In satisfying this desire, they sought to curate a body of knowledge called “Sikh theology” that might allow Sikhism to differ from competing religions, primarily Hinduism. As a result of this doctrinal competition, a previously fluid and contested conception of both the internal and external boundaries of Sikhism was replaced by a much more constricted view of religious authenticity. The enunciability of Sikh identity was now bound up with accession to a hermeneutical matrix driven by the desire to affirm divine transcendence. This kind of a relationship to identity, Mandair argued, was unthinkable prior to the colonial event. The desire to construct Sikh theology and to

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28 Ibid, 175-240.
establish the perfect translatability of Sikhism as a “world religion” represented a radical break from the precolonial history of the tradition.29

What interests me most about Mandair’s argument is his assertion that the process through which this radical break in native traditions came about should be understood as the imposition of a “first idiom” (the idiom of the colonizer/the British) on to a “second idiom” (that of the colonized religious elite). Through this imposition, Mandair argued, a previously flexible Sikh tradition was transformed into an ideological world religion called “Sikhism.” As Mandair put it, “such a transformation was enabled by the imposition of a dominant symbolic order on the indigenous cultures, followed by the appropriation of this symbolic order by the native elites.”30 According to this argument, native reform movements replicated a colonial politics of translation in which signifiers such as “Sikh,” “Hindu,” and “Muslim,” perfectly corresponded with the master signifier of “religion.” Therefore, each time a post-colonial South Asian affirms a religious identity and utters statements such as “I am Sikh; Sikhism is my religion,” he repeats the event of the colonial translation of native traditions as competing world religions.31

I am generally sympathetic to this line of argument. No one can deny the significance of the colonial discursive economy to the story of the ideological reification of religious identities in South Asia. Certainly, the institutional and social interruptions inaugurated by the British in India played a critical part in enabling the competition for religious authenticity that dominated the late 19th century. Advancements in technologies of print and transportation, an increased sophistication in networks of commerce, the emergence

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid, 175.
31 Ibid., 175-240.
of an efficient postal system, the introduction of new methods of education, and the creation of vernacular languages; these were all important factors in fermenting the drama of doctrinal rivalries that occupied religious scholars of all communities. Indeed, it is not coincidental that the 19th century was a time of unprecedented intra-religious and inter-religious polemics in India.

But just as one should not undermine the importance of the colonial moment, it is also problematic to understand native imaginaries of reform as a product of colonialism. What troubles me about Mandair’s argument is its presumption that the imposition of colonial power (power understood as both negative and productive) represents the condition of possibility for all moments of native reform. Mandair’s valorization of colonialism as the master author of native projects of reform needs to be more carefully examined.

An analytical framework that regards native reform as the result of the imposition of a dominant colonial idiom is not applicable to the traditions of Muslim reform considered in this dissertation. Take for instance a figure such as Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl. As I showed in chapter 1, his political theology was heavily invested in securing the absoluteness of divine sovereignty. Moreover, it was also critical of hierarchies in the salvific realm. On the surface, these objectives seem in harmony with a colonial liberal Protestant drive to flatten religious identities through a critique of hierarchies and institutional structures of authority. However, as I argued earlier, this elective affinity between Ismā‘īl’s reform project and colonial conceptions of religious authenticity cannot be taken as a relationship of “imposition” and “reaction.” There is little reason to think that Ismā‘īl’s imaginary of reform was shaped by a hegemonic colonial episteme to which it represented a response.
Unlike other 19th century native thinkers such as Rāmmohun Roy (d.1833), Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d.1898), or Muḥammad Iqbāl (d.1938) who were intimately familiar with colonial knowledges, Ismā‘īl was not educated in a British institution of learning. There is no evidence to suggest that he had any significant exposure to colonial knowledges about religion or Islam. Therefore, it is difficult to conceptualize his understanding of reform as a case of native accession to colonial hermeneutics. Mandair’s “imposition” and “reaction” narrative of religious reform in colonial India cannot attend to such parallel domains of reformist activity that operated under the shadow of colonialism but that were never subsumed by its discursive and political power.

Similarly, although the Deobandī-Barelvī polemics unfolded in the social and institutional terrain of colonialism, the logics and stakes that animated those polemics were internal to their discourse. In other words, neither Aḥmad Razā Khān nor the Deoband pioneers were “reacting” to a colonial regime of religion making that was imposed on them. Certainly, the tendency to objectify the boundaries and definition of religion found in Deobandī discourses, like Manzūr Nu‘mānī’s discourse on prophetic knowledge, seem to mirror colonial efforts to reify religion as a set of comparable propositional truth claims. Again, however, I would like to caution against the conceptual slippage of conflating an elective affinity between two discursive regimes with a relationship of reciprocity between them. Just because a moment of native reform happens in colonial time does not mean that it represents a response to colonialism. No doubt, the secularizing space of colonial civil society was pivotal to catalyzing the debates and contestations that erupted among 19th century Indian Muslim scholars. However, the moral contentions, the aesthetics and procedures of argumentation, and the
contrasting imaginaries of normativity made centrally visible during the Deobandī-Barelvī conflict had little do with British colonialism.

The institutional conditions of colonialism may well have facilitated the intensity of this rivalry. But colonialism did not produce or shape the competing understandings of tradition and its limits that this rivalry brought into view. My point is this: a theoretical position that valorizes the colonial episteme as the original fountainhead of all moments of native reform in 19th century India, a position that has dominated the problem-space of South Asian studies, is not applicable to the competing projects of Muslim reform described in this dissertation.

Navigating the Limits of Tradition:

So despite their varied interests, post-secular critiques of the secular, Subaltern Studies, and post-colonial theoretical studies on religion in colonial India converge in how they view native projects of religious reform. Either native religious imaginaries are entirely ignored or they are approached as derivative of the hegemonic “first idiom” of colonialism. This is so because these traditions of post-colonial theory are primarily invested in critiquing colonialism and the universality of liberal secular modernity. This is no doubt an important, profitable, and politically urgent task. However, the preoccupation with disrupting the normalization of secular modernity invariably pushes native religious actors and their social imaginaries to the periphery of the narrative.

In this dissertation I have tried to shift the lens of analysis from the colonial constitution of native identities to competing conceptions of identity and difference within native discourses on reform. More specifically, I have examined certain conjunctures of debates
in which the limits of Islam in colonial India were authoritatively contested. In doing so, I have sought to make centrally visible traditions of moral arguments that undermine the secular promise of ordering life into readily available divisions like religious/secular, public/private, and belief/practice. Instead, the rival narratives of tradition and reform described in this dissertation depended on a set of moral questions, expectations, and anxieties that were internal to their discourse. Therefore, they provide us with alternative logics of critique that do not replicate the colonizing grammar of secular conceptuality.

Moreover, the actors who participated in these antagonisms, despite their intense disagreements, shared certain underlying expectations about the practices, events, and convictions that were worthy of dispute and that therefore demanded resolution. These actors may have fought unsparingly over how to understand a particular practice or event. But what was never in question was the significance of that practice or event to the achievement of moral excellence. The stakes of their contentions and conflicts were secured through an underlying covenant about the goods, virtues, and excellences that ought to be valued, preserved, and inculcated.

As the anthropologist David Scott so eloquently put it:

Tradition is not merely an inheritance, something that you get. Tradition is not a passive, absorptive relation between the past and the present. Rather tradition presupposes an active relation in which the present calls upon the past. In this sense then, tradition always implies an ensemble of practices and institutions that actively produce and reproduce the virtues understood to be \textit{internal to that tradition} (emphasis mine). In this sense too, tradition is not principally about what happened in the past: it is less nostalgia than memory, and memory more as a source of sustenance and vision.\footnote{David Scott, \textit{Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 115.}

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This dissertation has described specific moments in the career of a discursive tradition, that of Islam in 19th century India, when it was invested with competing moral goods and understandings of normativity. It has focused on the religious thought of certain seminal Indian Muslim thinkers whose ideas on the boundaries of normative practice in Islam had not received any sustained attention in the Euro-American academy. In many ways then, this dissertation has provided a hermeneutical sanctuary for authoritative yet marginalized discourses that despite their centrality to South Asian Islam had been banished from the interpretive radar of Western scholarship. Of course, it has only examined fragments of discursive artifacts from 19th century Muslim India. In order to develop a fuller picture of this discursive tradition, several other archives of native thought need to be more carefully mined and theorized.

In this regard, a particularly embarrassing lacuna in Western scholarship on South Asian Islam is the intellectual history and reformist discourses of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth movement. The thought of major Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars such as Siddīq Ḥasan Khān and Naẓīr Aḥmad Dīhlāvī (d.1912), and their polemics with Deobandī and Barelvī pioneers, remain almost entirely absent from the historiography of modern India. Until this situation persists, our understanding of the varieties of Muslim reform in colonial India will be partial and incomplete. In the next phase of this project, I plan on bringing Ahl-i Ḥadīth pioneers and their rationalities of tradition and reform into the conversation.

Another serious shortcoming in the field is a highly inadequate understanding of Muslim intellectual currents during the 18th century. Indeed, addressing the question of how the topography of South Asian Islam was transformed in the 19th century is impossible without an advanced knowledge of what was there to be transformed in the
first place. Especially critical to this task is the theorization of the reform project of Shāh Walī Allah. Despite his pivotal role in the narrative of Indian Muslim reform, Western scholarship on Walī Allah’s thought remains limited to some important translations and dense catalogues of his writings. A comparison of his political theology with that of his 19th century intellectual inheritors will reveal important points of continuities and disjunctures. For instance, a comparison between Walī Allah’s and his grandson Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s notions of tradition should provide a potent snapshot of the shifts in Muslim social imaginaries during India’s transition to colonial modernity. This is another avenue of inquiry I hope to take up in the near future.

And of course, I will continue examining the thought of the actors considered in this dissertation. I want to especially look more closely at Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s writings on Sufism and prophetic love, in addition to exploring points of hostility between Barelvī and Deobandī pioneers that were not covered in this work (such as the questions of God’s capacity to lie and to create a second Muḥammad). The eventual objective of this research program is to bring into central view the aspirations, anxieties, and ambiguities of a Muslim subaltern tradition that continues to haunt the religious landscape of post-colonial South Asia in profound ways. This dissertation has been a modest beginning to this larger intellectual endeavor.

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**Biography:**

SherAli Tareen was born in 1983 and grew up in Quetta, Pakistan. He completed his primary and secondary school education at Beacon House School System in Quetta. SherAli attended Macalester College in St. Paul, MN and graduated *magna cum laude* with honors in May, 2005. At Macalester, he majored in Religious Studies, Economics, and Asian Studies. He was also awarded the Presidential Leadership Award for academic and extracurricular achievements. He began his doctoral work at Duke University Graduate Program of Religion in September 2005. The writing of his dissertation was funded by the Woodrow Wilson Charlotte Newcombe Fellowship for research on religious ethics and values. He was also awarded the Julian Price Graduate Fellowship and the Summer Research Fellowship by the Duke Graduate School. In addition, he also received the Duke undergraduate teaching award for top 5% teaching evaluations for his class “Islam in Afghanistan and Central Asia” taught in spring 2010. Some of his academic publications as of February 2012 are listed in the bibliography above. In fall 2012, he plans to begin work as Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA.