The Rational Psychology of Perfect Being Theology:
Towards a New Islamic Hermeneutics

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Abstract

Some of the attributes of a perfect being (e.g. first cause, necessary being, intelligent creator) are established on the basis of theological arguments such as the cosmological and the teleological. At the deepest level, these theological arguments are based on principles of rational psychology such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Moreover, belief that the perfect being is the moral omnipotent God is an act of trust and thus based on the rational psychology of trust. Theists in the Abrahamic tradition subscribe to first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator theology and must therefore remain faithful to any psychological principles (simplicity, sufficient reason, trust) that are the rational grounds for believing in the existence of their God. But such faithfulness results in a deep tension within Judeo-Christian theism. For example, a Christian theist who believes in the Trinity must at the same time remain faithful to the principle of simplicity that rejects the Trinity. Because simplicity is the rational basis for the deeply cherished attributes of the Christian God (first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator), it is argued that faithfulness to psychological principles such as simplicity discipline Christian theistic belief, in particular the belief in the Trinity. Examples of this nature offer a framework for a similar disciplining of Islamic hermeneutics on the basis of rational psychology. Muslim interpreters tend not to systematically engage in the philosophy of religion, and for this reason do not explicitly articulate the psychological principles that gave them their theistic Muslim identity. As a result, they deviate from such principles when it comes time to interpret the original sources of Islam (Quran and Sunna). Consistency is one of the demands of rationality, and it is inconsistent to assume principles in arriving at a theistic Muslim identity and then subsequently fail to apply those principles consistently to the task of textual interpretation.
To Reason and whatever Truth it may discover
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Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis is to use a deeply philosophical approach to offer a universal method for Islamic hermeneutics in a world that offers a bewildering array of hermeneutical methods. At the heart of this thesis lies a philosophical dynamic that is wielded with the primary purpose of establishing a universal standard for Islamic hermeneutics. The philosophical dynamic in question emerges from a fact about the human condition. This fact is that there are limits to what human beings know and understand. We can follow the philosophers and call these our epistemic limits. Whenever we pursue knowledge and understanding in any field of inquiry, sooner or later we come face to face with our epistemic limits. In any deep inquiry, there are always questions that remain unanswered. We realize that we know and understand to a point but no further. This confrontation with epistemic limits produces the critical movement of our philosophical dynamic. Our experience of our own limitations (of knowledge and understanding) causes us to recoil and we need something to steady us, to hold onto or fall back on, something that will make whatever sense there is to be made. Something has to give us the courage and wherewithal to choose — in a human condition of epistemic limits in which our theories cannot be complete and final - best theories and explanations for what we observe, and to choose best actions on the basis of best theories. It is universally true that those who persevere with the quest for knowledge and understanding even in the face of epistemic limits find the courage and guidance to do so on the basis of the deepest features of their psychology. When confronted with epistemic limits, we retreat to and gather ourselves in the deepest trenches of human psychology. So the philosophical dynamic being outlined is as follows: a confrontation with epistemic limits results in a fall back to deep psychology. The confrontation with epistemic limits establishes that there are truths that we do not know. The fall back to deep psychology shows our determination to make the deepest sense we possibly can out of what we do know. Even if we cannot arrive at absolute truth at least our belief system can be rational, in other words, it can be in harmony with our deepest psychology.

This thesis has a purely philosophical approach with regard both to theism and hermeneutics, and in the pages that follow philosophy passes judgment on both. A natural starting point for this philosophical enterprise is the age old question on the origins of the universe. The philosophical dynamic of the first paragraph immediately comes into play because the context of the question of universal origins is governed by strict epistemic limits. This is a field of inquiry where we quickly realize that there are questions we cannot answer. As a result, we have the expected fall back to deep psychology this being accompanied by the resignation that deep psychology must be the final arbiter of rational belief (in this and all other contexts governed by epistemic limits). In the simple framework of this thesis, there are only two kinds of rational person. The first kind, when confronted with epistemic limits in their inquiry into universal origins, offer the deeply psychological (and thus rational) response of theism. By theism, I mean the belief in the existence of a perfect being that is the moral omnipotent creator of the universe. For the second kind of person, their deeply psychological (and thus rational) response is not theism. This thesis is only concerned with the first kind of person. Its only concern is the internal coherence and consistency of theistic belief and hermeneutics. To be sure, there is a third kind of person but this kind is less than rational. This person fails even
to recognize their epistemic limits and/or fails to offer a deeply psychological response to them. Such a person is in no sense a participant in the philosophical dynamic that drives this investigation.

Critical to the investigation is the deep psychology that guides the first kind of person to theism. To discover this psychology is the task of Chapter 1: sections 1-4. It is uncontroversial that a theist must subscribe to the psychological principles of sufficient reason, simplicity and trust because these principles both ground the critical arguments for theism and establish the essential attributes of a perfect being. For example, in cosmological arguments for the existence of a perfect being, one has to be psychologically inclined towards the view that 1) there must be a sufficient reason for the existence of the universe and 2) simplicity demands that there be only one such reason (namely, a perfect being). Cosmological arguments would not work for you if you were (psychologically) inclined to the opposite view that 1) the existence of the universe is a brute fact requiring no sufficient reason and 2) reality is complex so that even if there were sufficient reason there is no reason to believe that there is only one such. Obviously, the theist must subscribe to the deep psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity in order to have an (cosmological) argument for the existence of a perfect being that has the attributes of being the unique necessary first cause of the universe. Both sufficient reason and simplicity also ground other arguments (such as teleological arguments) for a perfect being and its essential attributes of being a unique necessary intelligent first cause.

Once the first kind of person has chosen to become a theist the next logical step for them is to choose their particular form of theism. For example, they could choose to be Jewish, Christian, Muslim or some other kind of theist. The critical point is that, in choosing their brand of theism, the first kind of person has to remain unfailingly loyal to the deep psychology that gave them theism in the first place. Whatever form of theism they choose, it must be in harmony with sufficient reason, simplicity, and trust because these psychological principles are the rational basis for theism in the first place. The theist’s conception of God (their particular form of theism) cannot be in tension with the psychological principles (sufficient reason, simplicity, trust) that establish the existence of God (in the first place) and also establish His essential attributes (first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator). In this way, we realize that the philosophical dynamic of this thesis not only gives us theism but also has immediate and natural application for the brand of theism we choose. Beyond this, the philosophical dynamic also has application for hermeneutical practice because any such practice must also be in harmony with deep psychology. But the point for now is that the philosophical dynamic has immediate and natural application for our brand of theism first and our hermeneutical practice only later. As I said at the beginning of this paragraph, having opted for theism the next logical thing the theist must do is choose their brand of theism. The next thing is obviously not to skip ahead to Islamic hermeneutics. Thus, the philosophical dynamic applies to theism first and hermeneutics only later. As a result, having arrived at theism the next logical topic for our first kind of person is to outline a form of theism that is in harmony with sufficient reason, simplicity, and trust, because such a theism would be consistent with their deepest psychology. In other words, while there are many forms of theism there is one basic form that is rational and can pass judgment on the others. With rational theism in hand we should then evaluate Jewish/Christian/Islamic theisms to see whether any of these fits the bill. But even though this is the next logical step to take, I will relegate the discussion on Abrahamic theisms to an appendix in order to offer a fuller treatment of hermeneutics in the main text. In other
words, the logical and natural discussion on Judeo-Christian theism will be skipped in the main body of the text in order to focus on a fuller discussion of Islamic hermeneutics. But given the logical flow of the argument, readers who wish to maintain their logical flow of thought can insert a reading of Appendix 1 after reading the first four sections of Chapter 1. The logical reading of this thesis therefore has the following order: Introduction, Chapter 1: sections 1-4, Appendix 1, Chapter 1: sections 5-8, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Conclusion, appendices 2, 3 & 4. As far as this introduction is concerned, we will maintain the logical flow of the argument and so before introducing Islamic hermeneutics I will now say a few words on the contents of Appendix 1, viz. on how our philosophical dynamic informs Judeo-Christian theism.

Theists of the Abrahamic tradition subscribe to first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator theology and thus profoundly depend on the psychological principles that establish such theology, even if they often do not explicitly articulate and acknowledge such dependence. As a non-random example, consider that Christian theists must remain faithful to simplicity and sufficient reason in arriving at their final conception of God because simplicity and sufficient reason are already the rational basis for some of the indispensable and cherished attributes of the Christian God (namely, first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator). One of the deepest tensions in Christian theism is that simplicity is the principle that grounds the uniqueness of the first cause and necessary being, but the very same principle rejects the Trinity. As in the cosmological argument, one is searching for a sufficient reason for the existence of the universe, and one such reason will suffice, there is no need for three. In any case, the one reason that there is must be such an imposing and unique phenomenon that it will not leave room for any other. The only way to ignore simplicity and accept the Trinity is for there to be a sufficient reason for doing so. In other words, the Trinitarian must seek refuge from the principle of simplicity in the principle of sufficient reason. The only viable candidate for such a sufficient reason is a specific instruction in favour of the Trinity contained in a divine revelation transmitted via authentic historical tradition. However, given the deeply controversial history of the Christian tradition, it can hardly be seen as a sufficient reason for overriding as deep a psychological principle as that of simplicity. The Christian tradition is so controversial that we ought to assume that whatever the divine instruction was, it could not have been preserved in its original form. Thus, while sufficient reason could conceivably override simplicity such a controversial historical tradition cannot supply a sufficient reason. Therefore, any theist (Christian or otherwise) must feel compelled to reject the Trinity. Of course, a far more straightforward route to such rejection is to see that it defies logic to say that there are three persons in the being of a God who is at the same time not a collective of persons. However, the point for now is that because simplicity grounds the Christian conception of God as first cause and necessary being, unfaithfulness to it in the absence of sufficient reason is an utterly profound criticism of the Trinity. The example of the Trinity gives us an important first demonstration of how theistic beliefs ought to be subjected to a psychological discipline.

The simplicity-Trinity tension is even more marked in the writings of Christian philosophers who, for obvious reasons, acknowledge their immense debt to simplicity. Richard Swinburne writes: ‘Simplicity is an all-important and unavoidable criterion in assessing the probability of any scientific theory… The simpler a theory, the more probable it is… I stress the enormous importance of the criterion of simplicity, an importance that is not always appreciated… Simplex sigillum veri (‘The simple is the sign of the true’) is a dominant theme of this book… All that I have been concerned to show here is the crucial influence of the criterion of simplicity
within science. If we are to adopt into our investigations into religion the criteria of rational inquiry that are used in science and ordinary life, we must use this criterion there’ (italics added). In deep tension with this, he writes: ‘The arguments of the present book are, therefore, more accurately described as arguments to the existence of one divine being, a person on whom all else depends. That is theism, the view common to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Theism is, however, compatible with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity that there is more than one divine person...’. He offers an apology for this last view on the a priori grounds of God’s perfect goodness that necessitates the creation of exactly two other divine persons. But, of course, his intuitions on perfect goodness are in open conflict with the intuitions of almost everyone else on a perfect being and its power, freedom, beauty, majesty, unity, and even goodness. Nothing that Swinburne offers as an apology for the Trinity comes anywhere close to justifying his abandonment of simplicity, arguably when it mattered most.

It is evident that neither Jewish nor Islamic theisms are open to the charge of abandoning simplicity in their conceptions of God. In both traditions, God is seen to be one personal spirit, a simple indissoluble unity. While this personal God has various attributes the same is true of every other person and so this is neither uncommon nor against simplicity. In fact, Christians also make no attempt to avoid the natural (and unavoidable) discussion on God’s attributes. But the stark contrast is that in addition to the discussion on personal attributes, the Trinity ambitiously aims to describe a complexity within the very being of God. Positing any such complexity is a strong claim for which the Christian scriptures can offer only weak epistemic basis. By contrast, the Jewish/Muslim conceptions posit only attributes. Such positing is a weaker claim that is far more common to human understanding. It is far more natural and simple to say that Babar is, for example, tall and strong (attributes) rather than that he has, for example, a split personality which is a stronger claim about the state of his personhood that requires more careful investigation and thus has weaker epistemic basis. The Jewish/Muslim discussion on attributes is based on a simple and natural reading of their holy scriptures (as is also the Christian discussion on attributes) and for this reason has stronger epistemic basis. From the viewpoint of simplicity, the Jewish/Muslim conception of an indissoluble personal unity in possession of various attributes is superior.

As I have already mentioned, Chapter 1: sections 1-4 analyse arguments such as the cosmological and the teleological that eventually aim to establish the existence of a perfect being. We discover that, given our epistemic limits, these arguments cannot be deductive. Rather these are inductive arguments based on inductive principles of reason such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Another way of saying this is to describe it as a dynamic in which our epistemic limits force us to fall back on principles such as simplicity and sufficient reason that are deeply entrenched in our psychology. Epistemic limits do not come into play only when arguing for the existence of a first cause, necessary being, or intelligent creator. They also come into play when arguing that the perfect being is actually God, as all theists are wont to argue. In order to be upgraded (downgraded?) to the status of God, one other perfection that the perfect being must possess is moral perfection. Here, the argument from evil stands in the way because if God were both morally perfect and omnipotent then what could possibly explain the existence of evil in the world. Moreover, there is a deeper metaethical criticism that denies that morality is a perfection. While there can be thoughtful responses to such criticisms, it is still undeniable that in arguing that the perfect being is God we are once again confronted with our epistemic limits. The same dynamic emerges in which
our epistemic limits force us to fall back on deep psychology, but in this case we fall back on the psychology of trust. The theistic belief that the perfect being is God is an act of trust. In order to arrive at their belief in God, a theist has to hand over the reins of command to the emotion of trust. The river of trust has to flow freely but all the while the theist must keep in mind that the (deep) psychology of trust has to be applied consistently.

Where Christian theists can be faulted for failing to apply simplicity in a consistent way, Jewish theists can be faulted for failing to apply trust in a consistent way. If you trust a man such as the Hebrew Moses then why would you not trust a man such as the Nazarene Jesus or the Ishmaelite Muhammad? As far as any record of their lives and achievements go, all three seem to be driven by the same profound conviction in the attainment of moral perfection (this last being the attribute on the basis of which the Jewish theist trusts God). If the river of trust flows for Moses and his God then it must flow also for Jesus and his God and for Muhammad and his God. However, an acceptance of the prophetic authority of Jesus and Muhammad would actually undermine a pillar of Jewish faith, namely, that the Jews are God’s elect. Like his Trinitarian counterpart, the way out of this dilemma for the Jewish theist is to seek refuge (from trust) in the principle of sufficient reason. One can ignore the psychology of trust if there is sufficient reason to, but the only viable candidate for such a sufficient reason is divine revelation transmitted via authentic historical tradition. More specifically, the basis for the Jewish rejection of Jesus as a prophet would have to be a specific instruction on this issue contained in divine revelation authentically transmitted.

The Jews indicted Jesus on a set of technicalities and the basic point is that these technicalities would have to be authentically transmitted and properly interpreted for the hundreds of years of Jewish tradition before Jesus. Ironically, Jesus’ main criticism of the Jews was that they were too embroiled in the lifeless technicalities of hollow symbols and rituals to be in touch with their deeper human motivations (e.g. trust). A central purpose of his mission was precisely to breathe life into the Jewish law. But the point for now (and this was Jesus’ point) is that the Jewish tradition is very far from being one that is authentically transmitted and properly interpreted, and so just as the Christian tradition cannot stand in the face of simplicity, the Jewish tradition cannot stand in the face of a confrontation with the deep and powerful psychology of trust. So the Jewish tradition does not supply a sufficient reason to abandon trust. Moreover, the inability to accept Jesus and Muhammad even as prophets betrays an appalling lack of historical common sense because it is not clear on what basis historical figures such as Jacob and Moses are prophets but others of equal historical stature are not. I argue that Jewish theism trespasses both against religious psychology and historical common sense. By contrast, Islamic theism does not break rank either with the psychology of trust or with historical common sense. Muslims trust and embrace both the Jewish prophets and Jesus in their claim to represent God. The Muslim contention is that the teachings of these divine representatives were distorted by historical events, a point that in any case has wide scholarly acceptance. As to the question of trusting prophets after Muhammad, the Muslims trust Muhammad in his (authentically transmitted) claim that he is the last of God’s prophets. This clarifies that there is no breaking of rank with the psychology of trust or, for that matter, with that of sufficient reason or simplicity, as we saw earlier. As a result, Islamic theism is not at odds with deep psychology and so it is not a focus of this thesis. Rather, it is Islamic hermeneutics that carelessly ignores deep psychology with serious consequences for Islamic civilization and the world at large. Given the focus on Islamic hermeneutics, it should be kept
in mind that the main purpose of the present work is not to demonstrate the tensions within Judeo-Christian theism, although it is clear that an analysis of these theisms illustrates the basic hermeneutical strategy that we subsequently apply to Islam. What is illustrated in Appendix 1 is that theistic belief such as the Christian belief in the Trinity and the Jewish belief in election can be subjected to a psychological discipline. In a context governed by epistemic limits, deep psychology is the final arbiter of rational belief and so it can properly challenge theistic beliefs that are not in harmony with it. Critical for our next logical step is the fact that epistemic limits govern not only the philosophical context of understanding universal origins and the theological context of understanding the nature of God but also the hermeneutical context of understanding divine revelation. As a result, deep psychology is once again in the position of a discipliner but this time it is of hermeneutical practices.

Before diving into hermeneutics, I ought to attempt to place this thesis within an existing literature. It is indeed difficult to find its literary underpinnings because in order to make its argument the thesis cuts across multiple disciplines. For this reason, it is critical that we not attempt to straightjacket this work into a conventional Islamic Studies framework. It is a contemporary philosophical approach to religion, comparative religion, hermeneutics, and Islam and so its proper provenance is Contemporary Philosophy of Islam. Its theoretical anchoring point within recent philosophy is provided in an article by Thomas V. Morris published in 1987 (Nous) emphasizing the methodological significance of perfect being theology. Its methodological significance is that it relies on our philosophical intuitions about what constitutes the perfection of a perfect being and does so independent of any religious text or tradition. Therefore, perfect being theology offers an independent method to philosophically evaluate conceptions of God in various historical traditions. Morris writes:

In fact, it may be that the single most important, and surprisingly, the currently most neglected problem for philosophical theology is the problem of method: Is it possible to select rationally a best method for thinking philosophically about God, a method for developing a philosophically adequate conception of God? The interminable and apparently intractable nature of so many disputes in philosophical theology presses this question upon us. In this paper, I want to examine, and endorse, the claim that perfect being theology, among all its rivals, can reasonably be thought to provide a method which ought to govern our thinking about God, our articulation of a philosophically precise conception of God.

As Wainwright argues, it is very probably true that ‘the concept of a maximally perfect being is implicit in theistic attitudes and practices’, and this is especially so in Judaism, Christianity and Islam given the absolute conception of divine nature in those traditions. Morris makes essentially the same point: ‘The scriptures of [the Judeo-Christian] tradition present an unfolding revelation thoroughly consonant with the idea of God as a perfect being’. So it is very much as Morris points out, that along with competing historical conceptions of a maximally perfect God, we now have a philosophical method to judge between them. For example, we can ask how the conception of God as a Trinity, discussed earlier, would fare under the critical gaze of perfect being theology. Not so well if one holds strong intuitions about the indissoluble unity of a perfect being. But interestingly, Christian theists such as Richard Swinburne and Morris himself offer an apologetic defence of the Trinity despite being advocates (in different ways) of perfect being theology.
As we have already seen, Chapter 1 (sections 1-4) actually builds on Morris’ idea of perfect being theology as a method for evaluating theisms. It takes Morris’ idea a step further by actually offering a systematic method for evaluating theisms and I believe that this is an original contribution of this work. Rather than merely evaluate a given conception of God against our philosophical intuitions of a perfect being, Chapter 1 (sections 1-4) looks at foundational arguments from philosophical theology (e.g. cosmological, teleological) that establish the attributes of a perfect being in the first place. The idea of a perfect being is then built upon the attributes (namely, first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator) discovered in these arguments. But going deeper, cosmological and teleological arguments do their work on the basis of principles of rational psychology (namely, sufficient reason/simplicity). As a result, perfect being theology has its deepest foundations in the psychological principles that establish the attributes of a perfect being. Any proposed theism can now be systematically judged from the standpoint of this deep psychology and not merely on the basis of our philosophical intuitions. Continuing with our example, the Trinity not only offends intuitions about the indissoluble unity of a perfect being, it specifically violates the deep psychology of simplicity that grounds the very existence and essence of a perfect being, and it does so without any sufficient reason. So the charge against the Trinity can now be defined far more precisely than one based merely on philosophical intuition.

Chapter 1: sections 5-8 introduce the primary project of this thesis. The primary attempt is to demonstrate the need for the Muslim interpreter to be well-grounded in philosophy and to prepare the stage for interpretation by first engaging deep philosophical questions. As we have seen, I introduce the present work by engaging the question: ‘Is there a perfect being?’ First of all, I should explain why an interpreter needs to have a philosophical background and approach. We have already seen why a theist needs to have an understanding of philosophical psychology and the reason is that such a psychology holds their theistic beliefs to a rational discipline. Obviously, the philosophical identity of a Muslim interpreter is that of a theist (they are our first kind of person), and so they also implicitly assume deeply psychological principles (sufficient reason/simplicity/trust) even if they fail to explicitly articulate them. Moreover, their religious identity is that of an Islamic theist, and so they implicitly agree with our earlier critique of Judeo-Christian theism that was based on the very same psychological principles. To this point in our analysis we have not held them to account, in their status as Islamic theists, for all their implicit assumption of deeply psychological principles that establish their philosophical and religious identity. But surely as interpreters of the original sources of Islam – Quran and Sunna – they need to be conscious of the psychological principles that gave them their theistic Muslim identity so that they can consistently apply these same principles to the task of interpretation. It would be inconsistent for them to arrive at Islamic theism through a set of principles that they subsequently abandon (or fail to apply uniformly and consistently) when it comes time to interpret the original sources. To my knowledge, interpreters who 1) are Muslim and 2) have training in philosophy do not explicitly articulate the psychological principles that led them to Islam. In this thesis, the main authors considered who commit this error are Fazlur Rahman (Chapter 2) and AbdulKarim Soroush (Chapter 3: sections 1-3). As they do not explicitly articulate the deep psychology of Islamic theism, they are in no position to apply that psychology to the task of interpretation, and the interpretive principles that they do apply deviate from those that led them to Islam in the first place. As consistency is one of the demands of rationality, such interpreters can be faulted for failing to apply (or at least apply in
a uniform way) - to their interpretation of Islam’s sources - the principles that ground their Islamic theism.

Thus Chapter 1: sections 5-8 begin the task of interpretation by declaring that our hermeneutic is that of a philosopher turned theist turned Muslim (rational Muslim theist). While no argument is made either for theism or Islam in the present work, Islamic theism is a position I share with the interpreters whose work is critiqued in chapters 2 and 3. The main criticism of them is that they (and other Muslim interpreters in my knowledge) do not systematically engage in the philosophy of religion. As I said in the last paragraph, this leaves them in no position to consistently apply deep religious psychology to the task of Quranic interpretation. One of the contributions of this present work is precisely to keep track of the psychological principles that anchor one’s belief in God to ensure that they are also applied consistently to the task of interpretation. In other words, these psychological principles remain binding throughout one’s interpretive project, so it is in harmony with them that one must choose hermeneutical principles of interpretation. In Chapter 1: sections 5-8, we discover that the hermeneutics of the Emilio Betti/Eric Hirsch tradition is in relative harmony with the psychology of simplicity, sufficient reason, and trust.

The task of critical importance is to construct the hermeneutical context in which the act of textual understanding takes place. We are concerned only with a narrow community of interpretive discourse. The only members of this narrow discourse community are rational Muslim theists. All the authors discussed in chapters 2 (Rahman) and 3 (Soroush, Rida, Shâtibî, Bûtî) are Muslims who claim rationality for their interpretation of the original sources. As Abrahamic theists these authors believe in the existence of a unique necessary intelligent first cause of the universe, and also that this perfect being is God. Moreover, as rational theists they not only have to remain faithful to the psychological principles that establish their belief in God but, critically, they also have to be aware that strict epistemic limits apply to the context of interpreting divine revelation because such limits play a critical role in arriving at belief in God in the first place (Chapter 1: sections 1-4). We are not in a position to determine what God is thinking or His reasons for sending a revelation because we are not even in a position to ascertain that He exists in the first place (epistemic limits, no deductive arguments permissible). We only rationally believe that He does (Chapter 1: sections 1-4). So the hermeneutical context for this narrow discourse community is governed by strict epistemic limits with the resulting fall back to deep psychology.

Chapter 2 is a discussion of Rahman who offers a deeply flawed theory of hermeneutics precisely because he feels that he can circumvent epistemic limits via a Kantian moral law in order to gain direct access to God’s mind. But as I said, and it bears repeating, while our belief in God is rational, we are not even in a position to ascertain that He exists let alone determine what He is thinking. Given epistemic limits, our default reading of the Quran has to be determined by an application of the principle of simplicity to the cultural-linguistic conventions in which Quranic meanings are embedded. In other words, we have to go with a simple, conventional, and literal reading except in cases where there is sufficient reason to interpret the text otherwise. In general, this will be my rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason).

Rahman makes two serious errors with regard to the act of textual understanding. The first is that he believes that the interpreter can attain an objective understanding of God’s meanings.
He does precious little to explain how such an incredible understanding is possible, how we can overcome epistemic limits to understand God’s meanings. In other words, he does little to justify why the act of understanding ought to take place in a hermeneutical context that is so different from that of the narrow discourse community referred to above. Second, Rahman posits an impersonal moral law and gives it a role in the act of textual understanding. Again, he does not really explain why we ought to posit a moral law when, as members of the narrow discourse community, we have already posited the existence of an omnipotent moral person. Listen to Rahman as he articulates the first error:

In modern hermeneutical theory, the “objectivity school” has insisted that one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study. According to E. Betti, a contemporary representative of this school, the process of understanding is a “reversal” of the original creative process: the forms that we try to understand and interpret now are to be led back to the creative mind whose original contents they were, not as isolated items but as a coherent whole, and made to live again in the mind of the understanding subject.9

In the rest of this passage, Rahman makes clear that his aim is to understand the mind of the author of the Quran. Beyond incredulity at Rahman’s aim of understanding God’s mind, one should be suspicious of his use of the “objectivity school”. The objectivity school seems to have its origins in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher introduced a holistic approach in hermeneutics, an approach that was concerned not only with linguistic and grammatical interpretation but also with an interpersonal dimension. Beyond rules of grammar the interpreter was required to have a sense of the author’s thinking and intentions. The interpretive project could approach completion only when ‘a complete knowledge of the language’ was combined with ‘a complete knowledge of the person’. He thought that it was ‘necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides’.10 He could argue for an objective interpretation to the extent that it was possible to combine an understanding of language and author. He thought it essential for the interpreter to step into the author’s frame of mind but how is that possible without knowledge of the history and environment of the author. Given this insistence on understanding the author, it is obvious that Schleiermacher is offering a hermeneutics for cases of human authorship. In a famous sentence, he insisted that an interpreter must ‘understand the text at first as well as or even better than its author.’11 But here Schleiermacher was writing in the context of Biblical hermeneutics which is importantly different from Quranic hermeneutics. Schleiermacher’s view suggests that ‘with the benefit of scholarly research, the distance of history, and the ability to stand back from his social and cultural milieu, we may be able to understand Paul’s epistles even better than he understood them himself’12. Our research may give us an awareness of things that Paul could not have had given his closeness to the events he experienced. Notice that this sort of reasoning cannot be straightforwardly transferred to the Quran because Paul is a human author and Allah is not. Another German scholar, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), was deeply influenced by Schleiermacher and advanced the objectivity school with his view that the act of understanding is ‘an attempt to recreate the creative process of the writer or artist’.13 But even this proponent of the objectivity school does not seem to support Rahman’s use of it. For Dilthey, ‘the interpreter gains understanding of the writer or text (the “other”) by a process of “re-living” (Nacherleben) experience on the basis of “empathy” (Hineinversetzen). Thus we come to understand, and to understand ourselves, in the social activity of reading in
interpretive communities, and not through solitary introspection. Again, it is utterly obvious that Dilthey’s view is targeted at human authors. I find Rahman’s co-opting of the objectivity school quite suspicious because of the unarticulated assumption that we can understand the Quran as well as its author (misinterpreting Schleiermacher) and that we can somehow “re-live” God’s experience on the basis of “empathy” (misinterpreting Dilthey). But what is worse is that Rahman misreads Emilio Betti, the theorist he approvingly cites in the passage above. Betti is absolutely clear that the mind doing the interpreting must be of equal stature with the mind being interpreted, so much so that he makes this one of his four canons of interpretation. Randy Maddox summarizes Betti’s canons of interpretation in the following way:

As suggested, Betti tries to overcome such subjectivist leanings and guarantee correct interpretation by stressing the autonomous meaning of the text - apart from its subjective meaning for the interpreter. To carry out this project, he proposes four canons of interpretation. First, there is the canon of the autonomy of the object of interpretation. Betti insists here that the original author’s intention is determinative of the meaning of the text. Second, comes the canon of totality which requires the interpreter to read sections of a text in light of the whole. Third, is the canon of actualized understanding. Here Betti accepts part of the subjectivism of Bultmann by agreeing that the interpreter’s task is to retrace the creative process, to reconstruct it within himself or herself and to retranslate the extraneous thought of an Other into the actuality of one’s own life. Note, however, that it is the thought of the Other which governs this ‘subjective’ step. Thus, it is a very restricted subjectivism. Finally, there is the canon of the harmonization of understanding which argues that only a mind of equal stature and congenial disposition can understand another mind in a meaningfully adequate way. Thus, an interpreter must seek to develop such a mind-set (italics added).

Thus, for Betti, the mind doing the interpreting must be of equal stature to the mind being interpreted. But this is impossible if God is the author. Rahman’s misreading of the objectivity school is on such an obvious point that one cannot help but wonder what his possible motive could be. Chapter 2 argues that his motive is to advance his particular brand of liberal hermeneutics and that such a motive really explains why he co-opts the objectivity school in such an incorrect manner. It is critical to observe that he actually alters the structure of the hermeneutical context in which the act of understanding takes place. For the narrow discourse community, the act of understanding takes place in a context of strict epistemic limits because we cannot read the mind of God. Rahman alters this context with his view that we can read God’s mind thus removing the strict epistemic limits. He supports this move with an incorrect use of the objectivity school. Rahman seems eager to offer a liberal reading and allows that eagerness to get in the way of what ought to be a pure act of textual understanding.

Rahman’s second error with regard to the act of understanding is to posit a moral law when he has already accepted the existence of an omnipotent moral person. As a result, we must ask why he feels the need for this further metaphysical entity. For Rahman, the moral law is a part of God but we do not get an explanation from him as to why God should have such an anatomy. Why should we not see God along the more natural lines of possessing moral virtues in the way that human beings do? Here again, we get a sense that the moral law allows Rahman to alter the hermeneutical context of the act of understanding. Because the moral law
makes it possible to directly grasp objective moral principles in the way that Kant envisaged, it allows us to have direct epistemic access to the moral principles in God’s mind. Thus, we can know what moral principles God was aiming to establish through the Quran and we can keep them in mind during the act of textual understanding. The problem with all this is that the moral law is an artificial addition to the context of understanding, and Rahman gives the narrow discourse community no reason to make the addition. Again, we see that the eagerness to offer a liberal reading is confused with what ought to be the pure function of understanding.

Chapter 3: sections 1-3 are a discussion of Soroush who offers a superior hermeneutics to Rahman in the sense that he accepts that there are epistemic limits in reading God’s mind. Having acknowledged limits in understanding the nature and mind of God, Soroush arrives at a hermeneutics that is very different from Rahman’s. While Rahman believes that we are able to authoritatively ascertain the meanings intended by God, Soroush believes that our inability to authoritatively ascertain God’s meanings results in different people arriving at different meanings. So there is no single authoritative way of ascertaining God’s meanings in the manner Rahman meant to suggest. For this reason, our epistemic limits and human fallibility result in an irreducible pluralism, an irreducible diversity of interpretations of religious experiences and religious texts.16

In the face of epistemic limits, what Soroush conspicuously fails to do is fall back onto deep psychology and offer a hermeneutical theory that is in harmony with it. In contrast to the literalist Betti/Hirsch strategy discussed in Chapter 1 (Section 5), Soroush does not fall back on psychological principles such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Rather, he believes that our epistemic limits and human fallibility lead us to pluralism. In this move to pluralism, Soroush is privileging theoretical over practical reason and this is a very unwise strategy in a realm governed by strict epistemic limits. In other words, when Soroush realizes that there are epistemic limits in arriving at the belief in God, and in understanding His nature, then he ought to switch modes to practical reasoning and explore deep psychological motivations. Instead, he chooses to bask in his epistemic limitations, in the limits of theoretical reason, and decides that human fallibility has to mean that there is an irreducible plurality both in religious experience and textual interpretation.17 There may be no way to prioritize one experience or interpretation over another and there is nothing for us to do but to embrace this irreducible pluralism. But we have already seen in Chapter 1: sections 1-4 that there is plenty for us to do in the face of epistemic limits. We face the practical problem of having to decide what to be and what to do within limited resources of time and intellect, and for that we require a deep understanding of our own psychology. Deep psychology is the final arbiter in any context governed by epistemic limits and it allows us to differentiate and evaluate different worldviews. From the standpoint of practical reason, the standpoint of human psychology, not all views are on par and there is no irreducible pluralism. A theism or hermeneutics that is compatible with deep psychology is superior to one that is not.

A serious contradiction lies at the heart of Soroush’s view. The psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity gives him his belief in one God (even if he has independent mystical access to a higher being). Moreover, as a (self-proclaimed) free thinker, he is not simply a Muslim by birth but has independent reasons for being a Muslim rather than a Christian.18 The psychology of logic, simplicity, and sufficient reason gives him reason to favour the indissoluble unity of Allah
over the triune God. Thus, in acquiring his identity as a rational theistic Muslim, Soroush already subscribes to the deep psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity. None of this is said or acknowledged in his work but it is true as long as he believes that he is a rational Muslim theist (which he obviously does). When it comes to interpret the text of the Quran, he acknowledges epistemic limits and human fallibility but he abandons simplicity and sufficient reason. Instead, he opts for an irreducible pluralism. The problem is: when epistemic limits force us to apply simplicity in order to arrive at the belief in one rather than many gods, why do epistemic limits not force us to apply simplicity in reading the text of the Quran? Why does simplicity apply in the first case but not the second? Why does pluralism apply in the second case but not the first? Why is there not a plurality of gods? Why is pluralism reserved for hermeneutics but not philosophical theology? Where is the consistency? Keep in mind that the present thesis will consistently apply simplicity both to theology and hermeneutics.

Thus, Soroush is under an obligation to abandon his pluralistic hermeneutics and read the texts in a simple manner unless he has sufficient reason to do otherwise. But a simple reading of the Quran will demolish the Trinity and Soroush’s irreducible religious pluralism with it. It is not even conceivable that Soroush could propose a sufficient reason for reading the Quran in a non-literal way (on this matter) because for him the Quran is the result of his beloved Prophet’s sublime mystical experiences. The sublime mystic Muhammad may have produced time bound views on economics and politics but certainly not on the nature of the eternal God. If the Quran says that God is not triune then that is just as true today as it was when Muhammad said it. The problem for Soroush is that the simplicity that gave him his one God will not allow his irreducible religious pluralism and pluralistic hermeneutics to stand.

Neither Rahman nor Soroush offer a sufficient reason for abandoning simple, conventional, and literal interpretations. As an illustration of the general mistake, consider that the Quran frequently reminds us that God is mālīk (owner and king) and we are ‘ābd (slaves and servants). A simple reading of this is that God owns us and rules us and that we are to be obedient slaves and servants. In order to avoid the master-slave metaphor as an understanding of our relation to God there has to be a sufficient reason for some other understanding. As we cannot, contra Rahman, read God’s mind, we can only turn to other divinely revealed text either in the rest of the Muslim tradition or in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. But these sources neither have the authoritative status of the Quran and nor do they substantively reject the master-slave metaphor. Therefore, we must go with the literal reading because of a lack of sufficient reason. As I have said, in general, I will offer this form of argument as the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason). Rahman and Soroush fail to give importance to the literal reading and are not sensitive to the need to offer a sufficient reason for their departures from literalism. In other words, they do not offer an adequate rationale for sidestepping the literal commands of the divine Master.

My advocacy of a form of literalism does not deny that literalism is plagued with problems not the least of which is the bad name that it has because of its long standing historical ties to a blind traditionalism. As a strategy, tradition-bound literalism has been unsuccessful in negotiating the social transformations wrought by modernity. The tradition-bound literalist reading has tended to confine the text, to tie the text down so that it is divested of the resources and capacity to adapt in the face of new challenges. As a result, the fiqh rulings that are based on tradition-bound literalist interpretations have generally been unresponsive to
changes in the socio-political and scientific-technological environment. At a deeper level, a
tradition-bound literalism has closed the doors to rational philosophical inquiry. The work of
the Chapter 4 (A New Hermeneutics of the Quran) is to show that the Quranic literalism that I
am advancing does not entail such an abysmal fate and, on the contrary, it is in deep harmony
both with responsiveness in fiqh and rational philosophical inquiry. This is a compelling
argument in favour of it. So I spend much of Chapter 4 severing the historical connection
between literalism and blind traditionalism in order to free literalism from its ignominious past
and open the way for a new bond with rational inquiry (the antithesis of blind traditionalism). I
offer this literalism-rational inquiry synthesis as a new hermeneutics of the Quran.

Tradition-bound literalist jurisprudence gathered momentum in Islamic lands in the latter half
of the 8th century and the main reason for this was a general deterioration in the intellectual
climate of Islam, a growing reliance on traditional ways rather than new and free intellectual
endeavour (these developments are described in detail in Appendix 2). Muslims gradually lost
the confidence and ability to think independently and ask basic questions. They began to rely
in an uncritical way on textual evidence and early precedents regardless of the fact that social
conditions were changing. The Sunni schools of fiqh were deeply influenced by a traditionalist
movement and came to accept text and precedent as the basic sources of fiqh. These sources
of fiqh were four: the Quran, Sunna, ijmā (early consensus), and qiyās (early precedents of
analogical reasoning). While each of the schools had methods of ijtihād (intellectual endeavour
in fiqh) these methods were deemed legitimate only when they gave results compatible with
text and precedent, that is, with the four sources of fiqh.

While the Quran and Sunna were the primal sources, the later accretions of ijmā and qiyās
were also seen as binding. Following a madhhab (school of fiqh) meant that one was bound
not only by the primal sources but also by the ijmā accepted by that madhhab and the qiyās of
its early jurists. It basically meant that as a jurist one did not have direct access to the primal
sources. One could practice ijtihād only within the early legal precedents (ijmā and qiyās) of
one’s madhhab. While this led to juridical continuity it also restricted the ability of the schools
(madhāhib) to adapt to changing conditions. 19

The first reformer who challenged this classical system in a comprehensive legal theoretic way
was Abu Ishāq al-Shābī (d. 790/1388). He lived in al-Andalus in the 14th century, a time and
place subject to considerable forces of social and economic change. The milieu was such that it
is not surprising that a jurist of this period would feel constrained by the system of law
inherited from the classical period (3rd/9th century onwards). Given changing socioeconomic
conditions, it is natural that some new cases would not find satisfactory resolution within the
narrow limits of the four sources of fiqh. Shābī had to find a legitimate way to break through
classical barriers, in order to gain some freedom in making legal decisions. So he did what any
reformer would do. He went back to first principles. He used the first sources - Quran and
Sunna - against the later accretions (ijmā and qiyās) of the classical system.

Shābī saw that because conditions were changing some earlier precedents (of ijmā and
qiyās), thought wise and beneficial in their own time, were counter-productive or suboptimal
in current circumstances and were even against the purpose and spirit of the Quran and
Sunna. He drew the obvious conclusion that implementation of such early precedents is
against Shari’a because it is against Islam’s primal sources. So he invoked the primal power of
Quran and Sunna to break through the legal mould cast by generations of Muslims long before
his time thus creating the legislative freedom he needed. Given the elegance and effectiveness of this strategy, it is not surprising that when the Muslim world was again faced with socioeconomic and political upheaval in the 19th and 20th century, many Muslim reformers turned to Shâṭibî for inspiration.²⁰

Shâṭibî’s basic idea was that the purpose and spirit of the Quran and Sunna must override burdensome classical precedents. Thus, he sought an answer to the following basic questions: What is God’s purpose in giving us rules? What is the purpose of that whole set of rules (moral, legal, ritual) that guide practice? If we know why He gives us rules, that is, if we know what the rules are basically for, we will be able to better understand why He gives us a certain specific rule. Understanding the point of having rules will allow us to understand the rules better. Understanding the rules better will allow us to apply them better and avoid incorrect interpretation and implementation. So Shâtibî quite rightly thought that we need to understand the maqâṣid al-Shari’a (purposes of the Shari’a). We need to understand the intent of the Lawgiver in giving us rules. The question is how can we know of the Lawgiver’s intent?

In a deeper sense, this concept of God’s overall purpose or intention is intuitively appealing because it is grounded in the idea of God as a person who possesses will and intention. God wills the Shari’a on the basis of an intention to fulfil a purpose just as a legislator frames law with an intention to fulfil some purpose. That God has a purpose in creating the universe and humanity is a recurrent theme in the Quran.²¹ Neither the system of the universe nor the system of rules governing human life can be without purpose. Understanding the Legislator’s intent and purpose is essential to the work of a jurist who has to do his best to arrive at the fiqh ruling that is closest to the rule in God’s mind. Obviously, knowing His overall intent and purpose will set the basic context that allows one to understand the aim of a given command and thus determine a specific rule. So overall purpose gives a standpoint or perspective from where it is possible to discover right practice. Without such a standpoint the jurist’s task seems insurmountable because of the difficulty of ascertaining the basic approach or view that ought to be taken concerning any given issue.

As the word of God and the founding source of Shari’a, the natural place to seek to discover God’s purpose would be the Quran.²² But a literalist reading of the Quran gives us the following picture: God is Master, we are slaves, He gives clear orders, and the best of us respond by saying ‘we hear and we obey’. In other words, once we have (rationally) decided that God exists, it is not ours to question why. The primary task of reason is to decide whether God exists and if it is decided that He does, obedience must follow immediately in a literalist manner. The problem is that this picture of strict literalist obedience seems to leave no room for open philosophical inquiry. But there is a solution. If God’s very command is to pursue rational inquiry then strict obedience of that would result in a religious duty to engage in such inquiry. A literalist reading of the Quran in Chapter 4 gives us a clear sense of what we must take God’s primary command or intention to be. The most important concept in the Quran is that of truth. For the author (i.e. God) truth is more important than anything else. Verses in the Quran literally say that God’s purpose in creating the universe (including humanity) is to hurl truth against falsehood so that falsehood perishes (e.g. 21: 16-8). It follows that God’s purpose in creating the universe and giving us the Shari’a is the preservation and vindication of truth. If that is indeed God’s purpose, this would reconcile a literalist reading of Islamic text with the pursuit of open philosophical inquiry. The literalist reading gives us truth as the
highest value while open philosophical inquiry is aimed at the pursuit of precisely that value. Thus, in principle, literalist Islam should cherish, safeguard, and nurture free inquiry more than any other interpretive strategy or for that matter any other religion or culture in the world. One wonders whether such a solution that grants conservatives their literalism and at the same time grants liberals their philosophical inquiry is possible for other religious scriptures or is rather specific to the nature of the Quran.

So the fact of critical importance is that a literalist reading of the Quran gives us truth as its highest value and conceptual priority. As truth is the highest value on a literalist reading, there is no reason to see literalism as an enemy of philosophical inquiry because such inquiry is driven by precisely the highest literalist value. As a result, I argue for my hermeneutical literalism by severing literalism’s ignominious historical link with a stagnant tradition and creating for it a new link with open philosophical inquiry. Having created the new link one is reminded that it is precisely philosophical inquiry that led us to theism, to Islam, and then to literalism in the first place. Now, wonder of wonders, the literalism we discover at the end of the journey reinforces the spirit of inquiry of the whole journey. We arrive at the literal Quran only to find that it is not a jealous wife and does not mind if we go off on another journey as long as it is in search of the truth. Maybe it is supremely confident that we will come back. Our journey was such that truth and reason provided the basic conceptual framework through which the Quran was discovered. Since the Quran is discovered by reason, it cannot and does not impose limits on reason. Reason must define its own limits. Again, literalist Islam does not impose limits on philosophy but rather philosophy must impose limits upon itself. We will see that it does so through its rational discovery of a role for divine revelation.

The overall structure of my argument in this thesis is as follows: in harmony with rational psychological principles at the heart of perfect being theology, I adopt a Betti/Hirsch style hermeneutics that underpins a new literalism in Quranic interpretation. Such a literalism discovers truth as the highest value in the Quran thus establishing the harmony of Islam and philosophy. In arriving at my hermeneutics, literalism is not the only interpretive strategy that I consider. I contrast it with liberalism (Rahman, Chapter 2), humanism (Soroush, Chapter 3: sections 1-3), and utilitarianism (Rida: Chapter 3: Section 4), strategies proposed by modernist or liberal Muslims. However, I fault these strategies for failing to engage the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason) and proposing methods that sever a hermeneutical tie to the text thereby introducing relativism into Quranic interpretation. All in all, the authors that I consider from liberal left to conservative right are Abdul Karim Soroush (b. 1945), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), Abu Ishāq al-Shāṭibi (d. 1388) and Sa’īd Ramadān al-Būtī (b. 1929). In this liberal-conservative spectrum, I find myself ensconced, because of my literalist hermeneutics, between the utilitarianism of Rida and the maqāsid approach of Shāṭibi.

Let me at the end explain the discussions in appendices 2-4. The discussion in Appendix 2 flows naturally from the discussion in Chapter 4. Our attention turns to what is universally considered the second source of Islamic Shari’ā after the Quran. The critical difference between the Quran and Sunna is that while the former is a well-defined text within the covers of a book, the definition of the latter is a matter of heated controversy. So in Appendix 2, I set out to answer the question “What is Sunna?” One of the main themes of the Quran is that believers should follow the example of the Prophet, and for this reason all agree that at the
heart of the Sunna is the Prophetic model. But there are two ways to understand the nature of Prophetic authority. The first is a dynamic interpretation where the Prophet is seen to set an example to those immediately around him who imbibe that example and act in the spirit of it. On this understanding, because the Prophet is a human being like those around him, he is not the only one who is touched by the divine or capable of issuing rules in a wise and just manner. He is not the only human medium between theology and law. His Companions are also profoundly stirred by the divine intervention and presence, and in their capacity as human beings touched by the divine, they can also issue rules that are wise and just. Historical confirmation of this is easily found in the decisions of the first four Caliphs and the other Companions. Much the same can be said also of the early generations of Muslims who participated in the same ritualistic and legal culture (as the Companions) along with its spiritual and moral underpinnings. Thus, the Prophet is seen as the founder of a legal culture that is then built upon by the early generations of Muslims. He was not a pan-legist who pronounced on every present or future issue but rather the founder of a legal culture that could respond creatively to new situations. In other words, most of the work of developing Islamic legal culture was left for others to complete. This dynamic interpretation of Prophetic authority prevailed in the lands of Islam for all of its first century. On this interpretation, Sunna could be defined as the normative practice of the early Muslim community that is embedded in the ritualistic and legal (Shari‘i) culture founded by the Prophet and the Quran. Of course, the practice being referred to as Sunna was normative in the context of that time and place and can be used as a second source of law (after the Quran) by drawing lessons from it for the construction of modern normative practice.

The second way to understand the nature of Prophetic authority is to have a static interpretation of it and to see the Prophet as setting an example for all times (and places). On this understanding, there is a tendency to see the Prophet as single-handedly establishing a more or less permanent system of basic law, and as a pan-legist who pronounced on specific issues that the Muslims confronted and would confront in the future. This interpretation tends to devalue the roles of the people around the Prophet (i.e., his Companions) and of the early generations of Muslims, while amplifying the role of the Prophet and any historical reports of his actions (such reports are called hadith). A literalist (though non-contextual) reading of the Quran favours the static interpretation because the Quran does not literally ask believers to follow the example of the Companions or the early Muslims. This is why it could appear that a literalist turn in Islamic culture is at the origins of a static culture that subsequently found expression in the powerful hadith movement. But the literalist turn must in turn be qualified as one that emerged from a general intellectual inertia and deterioration that is observed to erode cultural dynamism in declining civilizations. It is a literalism that is based on an inertial binding to tradition, that is, a tradition-bound literalism that overshadows free intellectual endeavour. Thus, in Appendix 2, I argue that it is a tradition-bound literalism that set into Islamic culture in the first half of the 8th century and that explains the rise of the hadith movement. By the latter half of the 8th century this powerful movement had overshadowed the dynamic legal culture founded by the Prophet.

A question arises. How can I offer a literalist hermeneutics (Chapter 4) if literalism is one of the root causes of the success of the hadith movement? But it is not literalism per se that caused the success of the hadith movement but rather a tradition-bound literalism. The wisdom of my literalism is that it is not tradition-bound in contrast to that of the hadith movement, and I
abandon it whenever there is sufficient reason to do so. The literalism of Chapter 4 is not a blind literalism but one that is open to reasons and so it is better characterized as a rational literalism. Consider the case of Prophetic authority. While a literal reading of the Quran does tell us to follow the Prophetic example without explicitly including the Companions or the early Muslims in this directive, the case before us is one where, although the literal reading is the simpler one, there is sufficient reason not to interpret the text in this literal manner (sufficient reason overrides simplicity in this particular case). The sufficient reason is that it is quite obvious both from common sense and history that the Companions and the early Muslims did imbibe the Prophetic example thus imbuing their actions with a reflection of the Prophetic intent. Thus, the actions of the early generations of Muslims give us a fuller view of the Prophet’s purposes and intentions, and, of course, this is really a fuller view of God’s purposes and intentions because it is God, not the Prophet, who is the founder of Islamic culture (interpreter is believer). As the static interpretation devalues the contribution of the Companions and early Muslims to Islamic legal culture, it ends up with an impoverished view of the intentions and purposes of God and the Prophet. For this reason, its concept of Sunna is impoverished.

Finally, we can turn our attention to appendices 3 and 4. The task of Islamic interpretation is a sensitive one, and any demonstration of faithfulness to philosophical rigor could only help in establishing the trust of the reader. I must hope that Chapter 1 does this to some extent because it takes the reader on a philosophical journey to discover the perfect being. The appendices in question also help in this regard because they engage in a long discussion on the nature of the perfect being solely on the basis of philosophical and scientific reasoning. One of the primary aims of such journeys and discussions is precisely a demonstration of faithfulness to reason. Moreover, appendices 3 and 4 also strengthen the case for theism. In a more ambitious project, I may have attempted to argue for theism and also for Islam and only then proceeded to the task of Islamic hermeneutics. But even within the limitations of the present work, Chapter 1 includes (in addition to cosmological and teleological arguments) an argument from nothing in favour of the existence of a perfect being. What is special about this argument (and the reason for having the appendices) is that it results in a perfect being that is physical in contrast to the traditional theologian’s conception of God as non-physical. Now if it were easy to understand what a physical God would be like, that is, if He were a realistic possibility then that would go a long way in strengthening the case for a theism that is built upon the argument from nothing. So the argument for theism (as part of a more ambitious project) would be strengthened by a realistic exposition of a physical God. As things stand, however, I have relegated such an exposition to appendices 3 and 4 and a short description of their contents is in order.

Recall that with perfect being theology we are not bound by any religious tradition, and do not need to engage the traditional non-physical view of God unless it has independent philosophical merit. Does it? Perfection is ‘the highest we know in human experience’ (Campbell) and there is no way for us to know that there can be any such thing as a non-physical being. I am saying that there is an epistemological limit to knowing whether it is even a logical possibility. From a philosophical/scientific standpoint, we would never have given it serious thought if the traditional theologians hadn’t been so serious about it. But now that we are free of the burden of any religious tradition, we can follow purely philosophical intuitions. One very powerful intuition is that every being has to be physical (have energy, occupy space).
This is not to say that it can have no non-physical dimension, but to be *purely* non-physical is not to be mysterious - not to be perfect - rather it is to be nothing at all. To say that a being exists as nothing (no space, no energy) is to say that there is something as nothing (or in nothing?), and, at least on the face of it seems unintelligible. At least we can say that the burden of proof lies on those who want to defend such a view because it tests the limits of the meaning of human logic even to say that it is a logical possibility. So the nature of God would not be in harmony with our philosophical and scientific understanding of the world if we see Him in the way that traditional theologians see Him, that is, as non-physical. A non-physical God cannot be a sufficient cause (or reason?) for the existence of a physical universe. Nor is it conceptually possible to understand how such a God could be a conscious being at all, simply because if something is non-physical then on what basis can it be conscious? All the conscious beings in our experience and imagination have some physical basis or other even if it be a basis in only (physical) energy and (physical) space rather than (physical) matter. For these reasons, Appendix 3 defends a view of God as physical. The discussion may be seen to be guided by Morris’ observation that the perfect being (PB) can depend on a property as long as that property depends on PB. And because we are arguing for a physical PB, we can show that PB depends on energy, space and time and that these in turn depend on PB. In sketching the nature of the perfect being, I make ample use of the principle of sufficient reason and, in fact, the principle goes unrecognized in the many conditionals that I deploy in order to achieve a theological grand unification of PB, energy, space, and time. It goes without saying that this grand unification is based on the principle of simplicity. Appendix 4 is an attempt to explicitly describe what the physical basis of PB could be. It is basically an exploration of whether – given what we know in physics - a thinking being could be anatomically constructed purely from an indivisible unit of energy such as, for example, the photon.

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2 Ibid., p. 344
3 Ibid., pp. 344-5
5 Ibid., p. 22
7 Morris adds that the Judeo-Christian tradition is ‘thus a supporting context in which perfection intuitions can naturally arise’ (Morris, “Symposium Papers...”, pp. 23-4).
12 Ibid
17 Ibid., p. 121
18 Ibid., pp. 149-50
20 As far as authors considered in this thesis are concerned, Shātibī has a critical influence on Rashid Rida, Ramadān Būtī, and the present author.
22 On the general issue of finding the purpose of a legislator within the text of the statute see Auda, *Maqāsid al-Shari‘a*, pp. 229, 238.
23 Such a position may not be controversial within Sunni Islam and so we could use it to support the argument of the thesis but on the whole it could be seen as historically naïve.
24 Morris, “Symposium Papers...”, p. 21
Chapter 1
Rational Psychology and Philosophical Hermeneutics

Human limitations of knowledge and understanding are evident everywhere, for instance, while sitting at my desk to write these words I do not know whether there is someone hiding in the room, whether my children are playing or doing their homework, or whether it would be healthier for me to have a light snack before dinner. They are evident, for instance, if I were to seek a full explanation for the scene outside my window. There are some sparrows hopping in the garden. An explanation of this scene could include their genetic ability to hop and their natural inclination to find gardens to hop in. Their abilities and inclinations could in turn be explained by the environment in which they evolved that could in turn be explained by the conditions on Earth hundreds of millions of years ago that could in turn be explained by conditions in the universe billions of years ago that could in turn be explained by conditions right after the big bang that could in turn be explained by theories of what happened before the bang that could, at least in theory, be explained by causes receding further into the unknown past. But that’s precisely the point, viz. that the deep past is an unknown. Human limitations are often a great source of inspiration, and this is certainly the case with the limitations of our knowledge and understanding (epistemic limits). Some lines of inquiry quickly lead to a realization of epistemic limits as we just noted with inquiry into the origins of the universe, but as is also obviously true of inquiry into the nature of consciousness and free will. This thesis began as a personal attempt to improve my own epistemic position in the world. As a result of this work, I believe that I have succeeded, in a limited but important way, in understanding the world better. Having considered all that I could in the short time available to me, I have settled on a theory that explains all of it. To settle on a theory is not to be certain that it is the right one but rather to see that it is the best one. Given epistemic limits, it is the lot of humanity to settle for best explanations, not final ones.

1. A Cosmological Argument

My theory is that there exists a perfect being. I did not invent this theory but I think it is a very good one, in fact, the best one that explains my existence and that of the universe. The following is one of the simplest and most compelling ways to arrive at this result.¹

1. Some things are caused.

2. Things that are caused do not cause themselves but are caused by some other thing.

3. Every chain of causes ends in a first cause that is uncaused (in other words, there are no infinite regresses of causes).

4. (Hence), there are first causes (that are uncaused).

5. There is no more than one first cause.

6. (Hence) there is exactly one first cause.
Let’s examine this argument. Premise 1 is uncontroversial. Causal mechanisms can explain why there are sparrows hopping in my garden. Premise 2 is also uncontroversial. Things do not cause themselves but are caused by other things. A causal explanation for the hopping sparrows could include their genetic ability to hop and their natural inclination to find gardens to hop in. Premise 3 is said to be more controversial though I do not see any good reason why it should be. The chain of past causes that explain the present hopping of the sparrows must come to an end and cannot continue *ad infinitum*. From a philosophical point of view there has to be an anchor for the chain. There are two self-evident reasons for this.

a. With no anchor, no first event, the chain of causes would have no beginning and so would not have started in the first place.

b. An infinitely long causal chain, an infinite number of past events, would not have led to sparrows hopping in my garden because it is not possible to traverse an infinite number of past events in order to arrive at the present.\(^2\)

Premise 3 is said to be controversial because some philosophers maintain that it is at least logically possible for there to be an infinite regress of causes. I accept that it is within the realm of logical possibility that there be an infinite causal regress because it is possible that such an infinite regress is captured in our imagination from a standpoint outside the regress. I can imagine that some being could count all the way from zero to infinity (or negative infinity). It is harder to imagine such a being counting from infinity (or negative infinity) to zero because it is not at all clear how they would begin. What number is infinity and what number is infinity minus one? Arguably, this is how one would have to count from an infinite past to the present. Our epistemic access to these ideas is hopelessly inadequate but even so that does not mean that an infinite regress is not a logical possibility.\(^3\) Yet this admission on my part hardly means that we should entertain it as a viable theory of the cosmic past. An infinite past is on par with the Mad Hatter, both are logically possible existents. But we have good reason to believe that the Mad Hatter does not exist and ditto for infinite regresses.

Premise 3 is also said to be controversial because of another logical possibility. This one is also on par with the Mad Hatter. It is the possibility of a circle of causes. We need time travel for this to work. Event A causes event B that causes event C that causes event A completing the circle. As A occurs at time t, for there to be a genuine circle of causes A has to recur at the same time (not the same time of day but the very time on which it first occurred). The sparrow hops at 4:00 pm on 11 June, 2010 causing the cat to run towards it causing the sparrow to fly away causing the cat to lose interest and walk away. The cat going away causes the sparrow to return to the same spot and begin hopping at 4:00 pm on 11 June, 2010! Then the circle repeats itself. Of course, the cosmic circle of causes is much bigger than this one, beginning perhaps with the big bang and returning to the big bang at the same time. The circle is temporally closed. Again, while we may accept this as a logical possibility, there is no reason to accept it as a viable theory of the cosmic past.

Premise 4 is simply a valid conclusion that follows from the first three premises. Obviously first causes are uncaused otherwise the chain would not end. Premise 5 is an application of the principle of simplicity. As I need only one uncaused cause to anchor all the causal chains in the universe why should I posit more than one first cause? Simplicity is a deeply psychological principle that is directly responsible for the tremendous progress of science but it is
conceivable that it be challenged. Why is the truth simple rather than complicated? I don’t know, but along with most other philosophers and scientists, I feel that in the end the truth is simple. Thus, premise 5 has solid basis from a psychological standpoint. But that is not all that is to be said in favor of it. A first cause is really quite a special sort of thing and so in any case it is difficult to imagine that there are many of them. It is some amazing and imposing fact and part of its imposition may be that it never coexists with other first causes. Maybe it is some complete or perfect fact, part of its perfection being its uniqueness. Some egotists are wont to say that this town is too small for the two of us, and I am reminded of that because reality may be too small for two first causes. The conclusion (6) follows validly from premises 4 and 5. As there are first causes and there is no more than one, there has to be exactly one. Of course, the fact that we have established the existence of exactly one first cause still has not shown that this first cause is a perfect being.

In order to begin to see whether or not it is, I should first say something about what I mean by perfection and by the perfection of a perfect being. We can get some assistance on this from the words of C. A. Campbell on divine perfection. He says that divine perfection is ‘the highest we know in human experience’. While I am presently not interested in divine perfection, much the same thing can be said of the perfection of a perfect being. Its perfection is really the highest we can know and the most we can imagine a being to be perfect. The perfect being has the ‘highest manifestations’ of every intrinsic good we can think of keeping in mind that the degree to which it has each good is compatible with the degree to which it has all the others. So the perfect being is really the maximally perfect or greatest possible being and this conception is a common thread in the philosophical theology of past thinkers such as Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz. In Morris’ words (he refers to God here but strictly speaking he means a perfect being):

Recall that, in the tradition of Anselm, the operative conception of God for perfect being theology is that of a greatest possible or maximally perfect being. What this means is that God will be conceived of as having some unsurpassable array of compossible great-making properties, properties it is intrinsically better to have than to lack. What precisely those properties are thought to be will be a function of our intuitions concerning what properties are great-making properties, as well as concerning when an array of such properties is compossibly exemplifiable, and, if so, whether it is or is not surpassable in value.

With this view of perfection we may already begin to see why the first cause must be a perfect being. We know that there can be no causal explanation of the first cause (otherwise it would not be first). What kind of being would be such as to have no causal explanation? Moreover, we will see below that there can be no external explanation whatsoever (causal or otherwise) of the first cause. This is because the first cause must be either self-explanatory or such as to put an end to the demand for explanation. A being for which there can be neither cause nor reason has to be ontologically independent (of any and every thing) and it would seem that only the perfect being could occupy such an office.
**Principle of Sufficient Reason**

There has to be an explanation for the existence of the universe. The demand for explanation is not simply an expression of the faith that there are always explanations whether or not we can find them. Rather, if we give some thought to this, we realize that we can find no mental equilibrium (no peace of mind) if a demand for explanation cannot be, at least in principle, fulfilled. A thing or event without explanation is a brute fact but human beings are uneasy with, and find it very difficult to live with, brute facts. Regardless of whether we can find an explanation we feel that there just has to be one. Quantum events are seen to be uncaused but even there we have an explanation by way of a theory that explains why there are no causes. So even when there is no reason (e.g. for a quantum event) there is reason as to why there is no reason. According to a libertarian view of free will, human actions are seen to be uncaused (that is, in order to be free, a human action cannot be part of a natural causal chain). But even in this case, God is seen to be an explanation for the existence of free will. Ultimately, everything has an explanation or reason unless it is the sort of thing for which there is no demand for explanation to begin with. God is said to be this sort of thing. But a simpler example is the fact that I am identical to myself. I don’t need an explanation for that fact because it is self-evident and needs no explanation. It is not a brute fact because the explanation is not missing rather an explanation is simply not required.

In contrast to this last example, the existence of the universe is not self-evident and demands explanation. When I am asked to accept it as a brute fact I feel very uneasy. Someone murdered Mr. Green. On whatever pretext, the authorities do not want to carry out an inquiry. If the case is not solved and the murderer brought to justice, the incident will fester like an open wound in the minds of all those involved. That’s human nature. Reason defines what it is to be human. To ask a human being to let go of the demand for a reason is not to ask for something small. It is to ask for the humanity of a person.

A simple, universal, and analytic principle is that if there is sufficient reason for a thing then that thing will hold. This can be expressed as $Sp$ then $p$. This is obviously an analytic principle because it is true by the very meaning of the word sufficient, that is, that there is *sufficient* reason $S$ for $p$ just means that $p$ holds (for otherwise the reason would not be sufficient). We see this principle in the valid logical argument *modus ponens*. If $p$ is sufficient reason for $q$ and $p$ holds then $q$ must (logically) hold. If the butler hitting Mr. Green with a candlestick is sufficient reason for Mr. Green to suffer injury (if $p$ then $q$) and the butler does so ($p$) then Mr. Green will suffer injury ($q$). But what I have spoken of in the previous two paragraphs is a converse of this analytic principle. The converse is that if something holds there has to be sufficient reason for it. This can be expressed as $p$ then $Sp$. If Mr. Green has suffered injury then there has to be sufficient reason $S$ for that. If the universe exists (which it does) then there has to be sufficient reason for its existence. This is not an analytic principle because it is not made true by the meaning of sufficient. After all, it is logically possible that $p$ could be a brute fact for which there is no sufficient reason $S$. But while the principle is not analytic it is still universal because of its deep harmony with human nature. As far as all human beings are concerned, if $p$ then $Sp$. As there is no non-human perspective that we can adopt to view the existence of the universe, as far as all human beings are concerned, there has to be sufficient reason for the existence of the universe.
This converse principle famously goes by the name of ‘the principle of sufficient reason’. As the universe exists, there has to be sufficient reason for its existence. What sufficient reason could there be? Could there be an original cause of the universe? If so, what sufficient reason would there be for the existence of that cause? We are threatened with an infinite regress that could only terminate in a final reason for everything. This would be a reason that either explains itself or somehow puts an end to the demand for explanation.

The perfect being does both. First, everyone agrees that for a being to be perfect it has to be a necessary being, and so a perfect being is self-explanatory in the minimalist sense that it is defined as necessary being. The necessity of its being explains why it exists. Second, with a perfect being there is no demand for explanation or reason because the very concept of explanation or reason originates in it. If reason did not originate in the perfect being it would not be perfect. There can be no independent explanation for the perfect being because there is no concept of explanation without it. Thus, the perfect being solves the cosmological puzzle by stopping the infinite regress. So if the matter is to be decided on the basis of the principle of sufficient reason then we must conclude that there exists a perfect being.

What is the strength of our conclusion? This conclusion is based on the principles of simplicity (preferring one over many first causes, rejecting infinite regresses, and positing a perfect being that is an indissoluble unity) and sufficient reason (offering an original cause of the universe that also puts an end to the demand for reasons). It is a very strong conclusion because these are deep and universal principles of human psychology. The human mind can only find rest in the principles of simplicity and sufficient reason. Simplicity is the idea that the final explanation is simple rather than complicated. Sufficient reason is the idea that there is a reason for everything regardless of whether we can discover it. We can only find rest in the idea that the world is simple and makes sense. It is against our nature to live with burdensome complications and brute unexplainable fact. This is not to say that we do not venture from our mental home, thus disturbing our mental equilibrium, to explore other possibilities including the possibilities of complicated theories and brute facts. But it is to say that we never find anything so satisfying elsewhere so as never to return home to the principles of simplicity and sufficient reason. The reason we find nothing satisfying elsewhere could be because of our epistemic limits. In the absence of such limits we may have been forced by our great knowledge to accept the reality of a complicated world and of brute fact. But within the limits, the psychological price of accepting a complicated world and brute unexplainable fact makes it irrational to do so.

2. A Teleological Argument

Nature can be observed and studied because it is stable. For example, water has the same properties it had a thousand years ago giving us plenty of time to experience, use, and study it. The universe and objects in it have stable properties. The universe has expanded ever since the big bang. One assumes that it never suddenly stopped expanding, say 5 billion years ago, and then resumed again. Expanding is a stable property of the universe. I learned as a child that fish swim and birds fly and these things are true to this day. One assumes that there was not a single day from my childhood to adulthood when fish stopped swimming and birds stopped flying. This is a stable universe and it is possible to learn how it works.
Logic plays a central role in human learning. A child sees that birds fly. He predicates of birds that they fly. With an innate grasp of the logic of predication he tries various combinations that lead to language learning. Birds fly, cats fly, and planes fly. Cats pounce, planes pounce, and birds pounce. Some of these combinations reflect reality and thus contribute to growth of knowledge. But these gains are life-long only because the world is stable. As a child, I learned that birds fly and I will not be embarrassed if I now tell my child that the birds we see in the park today will fly. It is not that the birds of my adulthood may choose not to fly because, say, the pattern of cloud formation today holds no aesthetic appeal for them. Rather birds simply fly. The world is stable and we can understand and explain it.

That objects such as birds have stable properties such as flying makes nature predictable. Stable object properties give nature the appearance of being governed by laws. They make possible predication, language learning, and the growth of knowledge. Stable object properties are the basis for regularities in nature. A stable property of water is that it gives life to plants and crops. Water gives life is a natural regularity and our responsiveness to it has aided human survival and prosperity. Our responsiveness to regularities gives us the success we enjoy as navigators of the natural environment. A stable property of my glass ship-in-bottle is that if it falls on the marble floor it will break. This is another natural regularity. If glass decoration falls, glass decoration breaks. Notice that it also has the form of the first premise of *modus ponens* (if \( p \) then \( q \)). If the second premise holds, that is, if the glass decoration falls, then the conclusion (glass decoration breaks) follows given the regularity identified in the first premise. Why does the valid logical argument *modus ponens* reflect the regularities of nature? Is this an incredible coincidence or is it that the human animal has, in the process of its evolution, generalized over regularities to eventually become hard-wired with the logical argument *modus ponens*. The fact that logic reflects natural regularities suggests that logic is a linguistic expression of our responsiveness to them. Our logical ability to predicate may be an embodiment of our responsiveness to stable object properties, while our logical ability to use arguments such as *modus ponens* may be an embodiment of our responsiveness to the natural regularities that are a direct consequence of stable object properties.

Of course we are not alone in being responsive to stable object properties and natural regularities. Cats, for example, are aware that birds fly. A cat will rarely look surprised if a bird flaps its wings and flies away. On the contrary, cats give the impression of being quite composed, even bored, in their natural environment. This has to be because they find the environment predictable. They know what to expect. Having pounced on many a bird, and having seen their con-specifics pounce on birds, a cat is aware that if it pounces on the nearby bird, the bird will fly away. Most cats will not even grace the occasion with an attempt. They have imbibed the regularity, when cats pounce then birds fly. Here again is the first premise of *modus ponens* (if \( p \) then \( q \)). The only difference between cats and human beings is that cats will not generalize over cases for the sake of giving linguistic expression to a valid logical argument (if \( p \) then \( q, p \), therefore \( q \)). But this does not make cats any less responsive to natural regularities. Thus, even though cats don’t do logic, they behave logically. Logic explains their heretofore mysterious composure.

Why do I feel the need to drag the feline family into all this? The reason is to demonstrate how deeply responsive human beings are to natural regularities. Since even feline success depends on such responsiveness, it really defines what it is to be a conscious animal. We are so deeply
responsive that our innate logical behavior (shared with cats) is actually an embodiment of this responsiveness. Cats are aware that pouncing is sufficient for birds flying away. Human beings take such awareness to a whole new level by seeing that it has the form $Sp$ then $p$ (sufficient reason $S$ is pouncing and $p$ is flying away). Cats are also aware that if there is chirping there must be a bird somewhere. Here again, we are in a league of our own because we give linguistic expression to the principle of sufficient reason, $p$ then $Sp$ ($p$ is chirping and the sufficient reason $S$ is the presence of a bird). If there is chirping there has to be sufficient reason, namely, a bird in the vicinity. My point is that the principle of sufficient reason runs so deep in the psychology of the human animal that even early animal families such as the felines are aware of it in a rudimentary way. Abandoning the principle of sufficient reason in order to entertain the possibility of brute fact is a violation of human nature and the logic it embodies.

As far as the teleological argument is concerned, what needs to be explained is the universal harmony between mind and world. Why is the human mind so much at home in this world so that we are able to survive in it, explore it, and gain knowledge of it? How is it that we are as successful as we are (obviously we could be much worse at navigating the world)? I indicated above (paragraph 3 of this section) that there could conceivably be a naturalistic account of this. However, such an account could only really explain our responsiveness to mid-level reality – reality at the level of middle-sized objects. This is because our minds evolved at this level and so natural selection could conceivably explain why our logical ability embodies responsiveness to regularities at this level. For example, cat awareness that pouncing causes flying could be explained by the natural selection of animals that conserve energy in situations that predictably will not yield nutrients. But, of course, logic is universal and not confined to mid-level reality. The logic that embodies our responsiveness is effective at all levels of reality. Take an example from cosmology. If we discover background radiation then it could only be explained by a big bang (if $p$ then $q$). We discover background radiation ($p$). Therefore, there had to be a big bang ($q$). Other evidence then corroborates such results and makes it possible to predict new facts. The amazing success of human science is because modus ponens and its related family of logical principles are just as effective in physics of the very small (quantum mechanics) and very big (cosmology). This is not the case with all human faculties. In contrast to logic, human intuition is not effective at all levels of reality. Our intuitions usually work for us only at mid-level reality, for example, all of us find aspects of quantum mechanics counter-intuitive. At mid-level a thing is either here or there, but in quantum mechanics a particle could, counter-intuitively, be both here and there. Specifically, it is logic that is universal rather than any other human faculty. Can there be a naturalistic explanation of this universal harmony of modus ponens and all of reality? Such harmony is an incredible coincidence that demands explanation and so we must find a sufficient reason for it. The sufficient reason is the perfect being because only it could have created such universal harmony ($p$ then $Sp$ where $p$ is universal harmony and sufficient reason $S$ is the perfect being). We posit only one being as sufficient reason on the basis of the principle of simplicity but there is also the sense that whatever being explains universal harmony would be such an imposing and perfect reality so as to leave room for no other.
Some Half-hearted Objections

I do not find that any of the objections to date of the teleological argument are effective. The most important objections can be found in the work of the Scottish philosopher David Hume (Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, 1779). At the end of my last paragraph, I made the claim that the perfect being is the sufficient reason for the incredible universal harmony of mind and world. Hume objected that one can hardly claim to have made any explanatory progress if one postulates an incredible being in order to explain an incredible fact. In other words, while I may have succeeded in explaining the incredible fact of universal harmony, my explanation results in an even greater unexplained fact, namely the existence of an incredible perfect being.

Hume’s objection applies across the board to teleological arguments of every kind. The argument I offered above was based on universal harmony, but there are other arguments that are based on organized complexity, and yet others based on fine tuning of initial conditions in the universe. But the Humean objection can be leveled against all of these because it is an objection to postulating, in the face of harmony, complexity, and fine-tuning, even greater harmony, complexity, and fine-tuning. His point is that while I may have explained harmony, complexity, and fine-tuning in this world, postulating the perfect being leaves me with the impossible task of explaining the existence, desires, and choices of an incredible being in some other realm.

It is evident that Hume’s objection is half-baked. The fact that the perfect being is even harder to explain than the phenomena that it is called in to explain does not mean that we have not made an explanatory advance. For example, the theory of relativity is in many ways harder to understand and explain than Newtonian physics but that does not mean that in offering it as an explanation of Newtonian physics Einstein made no explanatory progress. The fact that the thing doing the explaining is more complex than the thing being explained is not a valid objection to the explanation being offered. But I think that the point that Hume is making is probably more subtle than that. He seems to be saying that given a final choice between an unexplained harmony and an unexplained perfect being, he would choose the former. In saying this, he is probably invoking a principle of simplicity. Why not simply choose the unexplained harmony because in choosing the unexplained perfect being we’re going to have a vastly more complex being and a far more complicated overall situation on our hands (Hume, 1779: Part IV, 34-5).⁹

Hume’s mistake is to fail to see that to think of the perfect being as unexplained is not the right way to think about it. As we noted in our earlier discussion of the principle of sufficient reason, the perfect being puts an end to the demand for explanation. It stops the infinite regress in the cosmological argument because there can be no demand for a sufficient reason for its existence. This is because the perfect being is the original source of reason and explanation and there can be no demand for reason or explanation from outside of it. The correct way to think about things is that everything has to be explained except for the perfect being, because, by definition of its perfection, there can be no explanation of it. This is the reason that when we postulate the perfect being in order to explain universal harmony, organized complexity, or fine-tuning or whatever, we have arrived at a psychological resting point. We know that by definition there is no explanation of the perfect being and so we have a rational obligation to withhold our final question, namely, “Why is there a perfect being?” By contrast, we can arrive
at no such resting point if, at the end of it all, we are landed with an unexplained harmony because we would have to accept that as a brute unexplainable fact. We have a powerful psychological impetus to explain away the harmony by postulating a perfect being because it is only the logical idea of a perfect being that allows us to attain psychological equilibrium. We should now be able to see that the perfect being occupies a very special philosophical niche. The perfect being is perfect because there can be no explanation of it other than the minimal explanation that it is a necessary being. If there can be an explanation of a being from outside of it then that being is not the perfect being seeing how it depends on something outside of it to explain it.

Hume offers other possible explanations for the incredible apparent design (universal harmony, organized complexity, fine-tuning) of our world. One is an infinite past in which an infinite number of possible states of the world are realized (Hume, 1779: Part VIII). As a result, highly ordered states of incredible design can occur every now and again. While discussing the cosmological argument I already dismissed infinite regresses (I sent them off to the Mad Hatter’s tea party, p. 29) and so I will not make any further comment on the possibility of an infinite past. However, another possibility that Hume hints at is the possibility of many worlds (Hume, 1779: Part V, 39). Yes, if there are billions of other universes then that should work because of the chance that one of these universes would end up with the incredible design of ours. But the problem we then face is to explain the existence of these billions of universes. If we use the new inflationary cosmology (see Appendix 3) we will still need to explain the primordial soup from which these universes bubbled up. We will also need to explain the existence of the principle of chance or probability that is being used to get from billions of universes to one universe of incredible design. Thus, while this is an interesting possibility it seems highly speculative (of course, the perfect being hypothesis is also highly speculative) but the real problem is that having postulated billions of universes it still fails to put an end to the demand for explanation (at least with the perfect being hypothesis we don’t have that insoluble problem still lingering around).

Other attempts against the teleological argument are made from the biology camp but are quite feeble. Dawkins (1986) and Sober (1993) have a particularly narrow-minded objection that basically asserts that evolutionary theory explains away biological complexity. Notwithstanding that this is a very controversial thing to say given that evolutionary theory (as a stand-alone theory) is fraught with difficulty, the more basic problem is that such an objection makes no headway against teleological arguments that are not biological. Thus, even if we accept that evolutionary theory can account for organized complexity in the natural world, it is obvious that limited scope Darwinian theories do no work against teleological arguments based on universal harmony or cosmic fine-tuning. It is evident that any challenge to the teleological argument must come from a broadly philosophical approach and not a narrowly biological one.

Another feeble objection made by a number of writers is that we should not be surprised at the incredible design of our world, as it is because of this design that we are around to observe it. If mind and world were not in harmony, if there were no cosmic fine-tuning or organized complexity then there would be no humanity and no one would ponder on the incredible design of the universe. The reason for our discovery of incredible design is that no other kind of discovery was really possible. The reality that led to our existence had to be an incredible
one. The problem with this objection is that the objector is embracing the incredibility of it all in the same breath as he is commenting that it is not surprising. But how does the fact that we are around to observe this incredible universe make it any less incredible? Of course, there is a sense in which it is true that we can observe it only because it incredibly led to our existence. I fully embrace that sense of things. But what is it about our presence that makes the universe any less incredible? Objectors to the teleological argument need to find an answer to that last question.

3. An Argument from Nothing

Imagine empty space. In empty space there are still distances to be measured notwithstanding that there are no observers to measure them. Now see if you can imagine the annihilation of empty space. Surely not, because surely, come what may, there are always distances to be measured. Distance never goes away. There is always space. Notice how this truth is completely untouched by thought experiments that give us empty worlds such as the following one proposed by Thomas Baldwin (1996). If you imagine a world that has finitely many objects and then suppose that the objects vanish in a sequence you will eventually arrive at an empty world. You will run down to three objects, two objects, one object and then Poof! My point is that even after the Poof! there must still be space. There is no way for us to get space out of our heads.

Some conclusions can be drawn from this thought experiment. 1) A state of nothing – a state where there is not even space – is unthinkable. There has to be something rather than nothing. 2) The universe is expanding and for this expansion there has to be space beyond the universe. It is logically impossible for it to expand into nothing not only because there is no nothing, but really because expansion can only take place if there is distance (beyond the universe) to expand into. As a balloon is inflated, its outer surface area increases. That outer area is, first, on the outside of the balloon and, second, is something not nothing. Thus, it is a logical truth that the universe is expanding into space outside and around the universe. The cosmological theory that there is space only inside the universe is necessarily false. 3) It is unthinkable that space is finite. It is unthinkable that there is nothing beyond space, as there is no nothing. There can only be something beyond space and for something to be there has to be space and so there has to be space beyond space. Thus, space is infinite.

We have made the following progress. 1) There has to be something rather than nothing. 2) There has to be infinite space. Of course infinite space cannot explain our universe because our universe is filled with matter-energy. The problem is that we only have logical reason to postulate infinite space and nothing more than that. Because infinite space is all we can come up with, and because this is hopelessly insufficient for explaining the existence of our universe, we seem to have arrived at a dead end. It may well be that there can be no argument from nothing to either a perfect being or the universe.

However, there is a ray of hope and it comes from the direction of modern physics. Of late, quantum mechanics has led us to abandon the notion of an absolute vacuum (see Appendix 3). In other words, there is no such thing as empty space. Suddenly the argument from nothing comes alive. If there has to be infinite space but none of it can be empty ala quantum
mechanics then the infinite expanse is filled with something. But what is it filled with? The quantum answer: energy fields. All of space is an ocean of energy. At every point in space there are quantum fluctuations of energetic fields. Thus, our little thought experiment combined with some new physics gives us not only infinite space but infinite energy to fill all that space. Now that’s progress!

Philosophical reflection actually reinforces the space-energy connection. The only way for us to perceive space is through some form of energy. All of the following phenomena require energy to give us a perception of space: I feel my body extended in space, I stretch my hand out into space, I walk through space in my room, I hear sounds from various distances and directions, and photon energy from a light source or reflected surface gives me a perception of distance and direction. Without these energetic phenomena I could have no perception of space. If I were to lose my sense of sight, hearing, and touch and also my locomotion then there would be no way for me to perceive space. Thus, from a purely epistemological viewpoint, there is no space without energy. Of course, from an ontological viewpoint, it is a logical possibility that there is a stretch of space that has no energy whatsoever. But that is a mere logical possibility, and so perhaps we can without loss hide it away in wonderland the way we did with infinite regresses.

From a purely philosophical standpoint, once we have admitted a small amount of energy into our picture then we must in any case accept that there has to be infinite energy. It would be arbitrary to postulate any finite amount. Saying that there are N particles of energy is arbitrary because why can there not be N + 1 such particles? Keep in mind that economy cannot be our only consideration and that broader considerations of simplicity must come into play. Postulating one energetic particle would be economical but arbitrary. Why can there not be two or five such particles? In any case, one particle cannot be the explanation for our energy-filled universe. Of course it would be recklessly arbitrary to postulate just enough energy to explain our universe. Is there any escape from arbitrariness? There is an escape in the peculiar logic of the infinite. Postulating a finite amount of energy raises a question as to the specific amount. Postulating an infinite amount raises no such question. Infinity, in mathematics, has peculiar characteristics. Add a number to infinity and you still have infinity. There are many finite numbers but only one infinite. Peculiar though it is, and in stark contrast to the finite numbers, there can be no increase or decrease to infinity. Infinite energy does not offer a range of options as to how much energy there is. Infinite energy is a single non-arbitrary amount. The only escape from arbitrariness is postulating infinite energy. This solution respects the principle of simplicity.

It now follows that we should ask how this infinite energy is ordered in infinite space. A consideration parallel to the finite-infinite debates arises. Should the ordering be imperfect or perfect? Just as there are many amounts that are finite and only one that is infinite, there are many orderings that are imperfect and only one that is perfect. This also harkens to the second law of thermodynamics that is based on the empirical truth that the overwhelming majority of states of a complex system are disordered while there is only one or a handful of ordered states. The overwhelming number of disordered states is the reason for the overwhelming probability with which complex systems move towards states of disorder. In the same way, there are immeasurably more imperfect orderings in comparison to the perfect order. So we reason in the same way to the perfect order because it is single and non-arbitrary. The perfect
order of infinite energy is the perfect being and its perfection gives rise to self-conscious will 
and the perfect balance of power, knowledge, wisdom, etc.

If the perfect being is the something that there is then it has a lot of explaining to do because 
the only explanations to be had are from the something that there is. Nothing, because it is 
nothing, it cannot explain anything. The something that there is has to be the source of all 
explanation. Brooding over the perfect being as ultimate eternal reality will help us understand 
how we got here. Can the perfect being explain why nothing is unthinkable? Yes. As it is a 
necessary being, it is the answer to the question of why there is something rather than 
nothing. Because of its necessary reality, there can be no state of nothing. Nothing is 
unthinkable. Can it explain why the something that there is cannot be mere infinite space? Yes. 
As it is a necessary being with a basis in energy, there has to be energy and not merely infinite 
space. Can it explain why there is infinite energy? Yes. That is because it is an infinite being 
with infinite resources at its disposal. If the perfect being is reality then we have a powerful 
theory for explaining our universe, namely, that our universe was created by a perfect being 
with energy in space. Going with the principle of simplicity, the perfect being hypothesis is a 
winner.

The argument from nothing gives us a perfect being that is physical (because space and energy 
are physical and so their perfect ordering is also physical). This makes irrelevant serious 
objections that are raised against the existence of the traditional nonphysical God. First, if God 
is nonphysical then how could He be the cause of the physical universe and how could He have 
any effect on the universe today? Basically, how can a nonphysical being have any effect on a 
physical world? Second, if God is nonphysical how can He be a conscious being at all? Every 
conscious being has a physical basis in the brain (even if only an incorporeal brain based on 
pure energy). What could possibly be the basis for the consciousness of a nonphysical being? 
Traditional theologians tend to respond that we cannot understand how things are with God. 
He is both causally efficacious and conscious despite being nonphysical and we cannot 
understand how He pulls this off. But without even offering a clue as to how this might be 
possible traditional theologians customarily argue from a weak position. The deeper problem 
is that there is a profound conceptual limitation to offering any such clue. A very powerful 
philosophical/scientific intuition is that every being has to be physical (have energy, occupy 
space). This is not to say that it can have no nonphysical dimension, but to be purely 
nonphysical is not to be mysterious - not to be perfect - rather it is to be nothing at all. To say 
that a being exists as nothing (no space, no energy) is to say that there is something as nothing 
(or in nothing?) and this seems unintelligible. There may even be an epistemological limitation 
to saying merely that it is a logical possibility (as in the case of infinite regresses and circles of 
causes, see endnote 3). There may be no way to tell that it is. So it is not just nonphysical 
causation and consciousness that are incomprehensible rather the fundamental conceptual 
problem is nonphysical existence. Of course, if God were physical (as our perfect being is) then 
these objections would not even be relevant. 19

4. Simplicity and Rational Psychology

The aim of presenting arguments for the existence of a perfect being was to discover the 
psychological principles that ground these arguments. We have succeeded in identifying two

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such principles, namely, simplicity and sufficient reason. We saw both principles at work in the
cosmological and teleological arguments and simplicity at work in the argument from nothing.
Some comments on the psychology of the principle of sufficient reason were included earlier
(pp. 31-4), and so I will now say a word on the psychology of simplicity. As this is a
philosophical discussion, the principle of simplicity we are referring to is distinct from the more
scientific principle known as Occam’s Razor. The latter principle originally aimed to rid science
of unnecessary hypotheses (‘entities are not to be multiplied unnecessarily’), for example,
Goropius’ hypotheses that Adam spoke a dialect of German. Understandably, Leibniz thought
that Goropius’ claim was virtual nonsense and he invented the word *gorapise* to refer to the
pastime of multiplying auxiliary hypotheses.20

The influence of simplicity on science is unquestionable. We know that scientists have made
astonishing progress when they have followed their intuitions of simplicity. Newton was able
to show that an apple falls for the same reason that the Moon falls towards the Earth and that
this also explains the tides and the orbits of planets and stars in the universe. He showed that
there is a simple explanation for seemingly unrelated phenomena. Nature follows the simple
law of gravity rather than a hodgepodge of complicated laws, and such application of simplicity
is a case of Occam’s Razor (as it rids science of a hodgepodge of complicated laws). Physics on
the whole has made astonishing progress with this principle of simplicity. Maxwell was
following intuitions of simplicity when he hypothesized that electricity and magnetism are two
sides of the same natural force.21 His intuitions were fully vindicated when it was discovered
that the photon is the messenger particle of both forces. Salam, Weinberg, and Glashow were
following intuitions of simplicity when they theorized that the electromagnetic and weak
forces have a common origin, that they are fundamentally the same force.22 Experimental
confirmation of their discovery came much later but their intuitions of simplicity stood them in
good stead.

However, as I said, this is a philosophical discussion and so the principle of simplicity that we
are referring to is a meta-scientific one. It is not merely a scientific principle that seeks to be rid
of unnecessary hypotheses but is rather the overarching metaphysical view that nature is, on
the whole or ultimately, simple. Feuer explains its provenance:

There are thinkers who hold that the principle of simplicity rests on a metaphysical
foundation. The faith that nature is governed by simple laws has been held by the
greatest scientists, and is held to underlie the principle of simplicity. Newton declared
that the first rule of philosophizing is "that Nature does nothing in vain, and more is
vain when less will serve; for Nature is pleased with simplicity, and affects not the
pomp of superfluous causes". For Einstein, this faith took on an almost religious
quality. The idea of mathematical simplicity, he believed, is actualized in nature. "In
every important advance," Einstein wrote, "the physicist finds that the fundamental
laws are simplified more and more as experimental research advances". When Einstein
had a new idea, he is said to have asked himself: "Could God have created the world
in this way?" or "Is this mathematical structure worthy of God?" Translated into
ordinary language this sentence means: 'Is this theory logically simple enough?' Now
this belief in the simplicity of Nature has a long philosophical history. I shall call it the
meta-scientific principle of simplicity in order to distinguish it from the scientific,
methodological principle known as Occam’s Razor. The meta-scientific belief was held
by Leibniz to be the principle of Divine economy: that God achieves a maximum of effects with a minimum of means. This meta-scientific creed has had an immense heuristic influence on the history of science.23

But while the importance of simplicity is undeniable, it is clearly not a principle that goes unchallenged in philosophy. The naturalist Buffon, for example, ‘rebutted the Linnaean classification on the ground that its simplicity constituted a slander against God. Was God, he intimated so simple-minded that his creations could be grasped in so simple a scheme?’24 Buffon’s challenge begins to expose the assumptions of philosophical simplicity. For all we know, God may have gone about creation in a roundabout way in order to humble our petty intellects. Meta-scientific simplicity often assumes that the known laws of nature will converge ‘as scientific systems approach toward completeness’. Indeed, this was Einstein’s faith (‘fundamental laws are simplified more and more as experimental research advances’) but how can we possibly know that a ‘scientific system is approaching toward completeness’? Quite possibly, the universe is so complex that our most mature science may still be in its infancy. There is no way of telling, ‘we do not know whether the series of novel phenomena which science discovers is convergent in character. The advent of new and unexplained facts may perhaps be more similar to a divergent series, “so that the more we have explained, the more there is to explain”.’25 The advent of quantum mechanics as one of our most powerful explanations of how the universe works would certainly seem to corroborate the ‘divergent series’ view. Feuer:

Nor do we have any way of knowing whether a science has explained the major phenomena of its domain, so that minor phenomena only remain unexplained. The explanation of so-called minor "deviations" may require the most drastic reconstruction of the existent theoretical system. Furthermore, new instruments, from the telescope to the mass accelerator, open up new continents of fact, and usually shatter the systematic status quo. We, therefore, have no way of forecasting in principle the direction, whether towards or away from simplicity, which the history of scientific laws will take. Consequently, any assertion concerning the simplicity of nature, as a meta-scientific principle must remain indeterminate. Knowledge is a groping process in which the direction remains indeterminate and the goal unknown. Einstein’s faith in the simplicity of nature is, from our standpoint, a kind of "scientific optimism" (to use Philipp Frank’s words). A decision of temperament is involved which is extra-scientific. A "scientific pessimist" will incline toward the faith that "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." The notion of a simple universe elicits a rebellion, a clausrophobia, in some people. Whitehead’s aphorism, "Seek simplicity, and distrust it", expresses the fruitful interaction of both types of scientific temperament.26

Given such meta-scientific pessimism, on what basis am I advocating our use of the principle of simplicity? My basis is psychological. Cosmological, teleological, and other arguments demonstrate that there is no deductive proof for the existence of a perfect being. A deductive argument would require knowledge of a kind human beings do not possess. Because of the limitations of our knowledge (our epistemic limits) we are forced to fall back on deep principles of human psychology, and simplicity is one of these. Of course, the fact that simplicity is a deep feature of our psychology does not establish that nature is simple in the
way that Newton and Einstein had hoped. We may merely have discovered that human beings are simple-minded. Because of our simple-mindedness we are drawn towards a simple view of nature. So we should keep in mind that our love for simple theories is because of our innate simple-mindedness and not because we have any way of knowing that nature is simple. As Stanley Jevons remarked, “Simplicity is naturally agreeable to a mind of limited powers”. But if all we have discovered is that we are simple-minded, how can such psychological simplicity be a basis for establishing the ontological truth of the perfect being. The answer is that it cannot but also that it does not seek to establish such ontological truth. What it does seek to establish is the rationality of belief in the existence of the perfect being, and this it can do because what is rational is so from the standpoint of human psychology. We cannot make rational decisions from a standpoint other than our own and from our standpoint the principle of simplicity is a motivation of unparalleled power. The imperative of simplicity may draw its strength from the human condition, from the fact that both lifespan and intellect are limited and it is within these limits that we must find the best possible explanation of our world.

Summarizing these first four sections, we saw that epistemic limits govern the context in which we understand the origins of the universe. They force us to retreat to the deep psychology of simplicity and sufficient reason and also that of logic, as it is the natural home of the principle of sufficient reason (pp. 31-4). But epistemic limits do not come into play only when arguing for the existence of a first cause, necessary being, or intelligent creator. They also come into play when arguing that the perfect being is actually God, as all theists are wont to argue. In order to be upgraded (downgraded?) to the status of God, one other perfection that the perfect being must possess is moral perfection. Here, the argument from evil stands in the way because if God were both morally perfect and omnipotent then what could possibly explain the existence of evil in the world. Moreover, there is a deeper meta-ethical criticism that denies that morality is a perfection. While there can be thoughtful responses to such criticisms, it is still undeniable that in arguing that the perfect being is God we are once again confronted with our epistemic limits. The familiar dynamic emerges in which our epistemic limits force us to retreat to deep psychology, but in this case we fall back on the emotion of trust. The theistic belief that the perfect being is God is an act of trust. In order to arrive at his belief in God, a theist has to hand over the reins of command to the psychology of trust (the river of trust must flow freely). But this also means that the psychology of trust has to be applied consistently.

Once simplicity, sufficient reason, and trust have guided us to theism these principles cannot simply be abandoned when entering the next logical phase of the discussion in which one chooses one form of theism over another. After the first step of arriving at theism, choosing a form of theism is the natural and obvious second step. However, in order to maintain the focus of this thesis on Islamic hermeneutics this second step is not included in the main text. It is relegated to Appendix 1 which could thus, logically, be read at this point before moving onto Section 5 on hermeneutics. Appendix 1 is concerned with an application of deep psychology to the realm of Abrahamic theism with a view to identifying a form of theism that is in harmony with deep psychology. There we see that a consistent application of deep psychology favors some forms of theism while disciplining others. More specifically, Islamic theism is favored while Judeo-Christian theism is subjected to disciplinary criticism because it does not fall in line with deep psychology. Thus Appendix 1 plays the critical role of indicating our interest in Islam and its hermeneutics. But Appendix 1 also establishes the critical role of deep psychology in
contexts governed by epistemic limits such as the context of exploring the nature of God and of favoring the Islamic God-concept over others. In such contexts, deep psychology is the final arbiter of rational belief and this is also the role it will play in the Islamic hermeneutics of Section 5 below and of chapters 2 and 3. Epistemic limits govern not only the philosophical context of understanding universal origins and the theological context of understanding the nature of God but also the hermeneutical context of understanding divine revelation. They throw us back onto deep psychology in the latter context as much as in both of the former. The dynamic of epistemic limits forcing us back onto deep psychology results in the discovery of a philosophical hermeneutics that is the topic of the next section.

5. Hermeneutics

As discussed in Appendix 1, Jews and Christians assume deep psychological principles (simplicity, sufficient reason, logic, trust) in arriving at theism but fail to apply them consistently in arriving at their specific form of theism. Muslims are in no way exempt from making this basic error of inconsistency, and they also assume principles that they do not consistently apply. Obviously, in arriving at theism, they also assume the very same psychological principles as Jews and Christians, but as interpreters of the original sources of Islam – Quran and Sunna – they often deviate from those principles. The purpose of chapters 2 and 3 will be to analyze the flawed hermeneutical strategies of various Muslim authors while Chapter 4 will aim to arrive at a final strategy that is in harmony with the rational psychology of perfect being theology. However, the philosophical foundations of that final hermeneutics are laid in this section.

It is critical to bear in mind the hermeneutical context for the act of understanding the text of the Quran. Each Muslim interpreter invariably claims that his is the rational interpretation. In any event, we are only interested in the interpreters who do. Certainly, all the interpreters considered in chapters 2 and 3 have claimed rationality for their interpretation. The Quranic interpreters we consider all want to be part of the narrow discourse community of rational Muslim theists. As theists, more specifically as subscribers to first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator theology, Quranic interpreters implicitly assume the psychological principles of simplicity, sufficient reason and trust. As rational theists, such interpreters must apply these principles consistently to the task of interpretation.

The contents of the previous paragraph can be contextualized in parallel using some of the language of modern day hermeneutics. The interpretive discourse community is narrow in the Heideggerian sense that all its members - in their capacity as human beings living after the invention of writing - see the Quran as a book. Moreover, it is narrower than this in the sense that in their capacity as theists, they see the universe as having a unique necessary intelligent first cause. Not only this, but it is even narrower in the sense that in their capacity as Muslim theists, they see the Quran as a book that is authored by the unique necessary intelligent first cause. And finally, as rational Muslim theists they see themselves as having all of those previous disclosures on the basis of (Gadamerian) rational legitimate pre-understandings. This thesis is concerned with the consistency and rationality of the Quranic interpretations of members of this very narrow discourse community.
The Muslim interpreters considered from liberal left to conservative right are Abdul Karim Soroush (b. 1945), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), Abu Ishâq al-Shâtibi (d. 1388), and Sa’id Ramadân al-Bûtî (b. 1929). The general criticism of them is that they do not systematically engage religious philosophy in a way so as to explicitly articulate the psychological principles that gave them their theistic Muslim identity. Without the explicit principles in hand they subsequently fail to apply them consistently in their hermeneutics. The reasons for including Soroush and Bûtî even though my final hermeneutics is not close to theirs is that both attempt to offer a rational hermeneutics, and do so in such a way so as to secure the two ends of our liberal-conservative spectrum thus giving perspective to the overall project. But another reason is that their arguments are related in interesting ways to those of the authors in their immediate vicinity. For example, Rahman is to the immediate right of Soroush and his views on revelation and fiqh differ from the latter’s in an interesting way. Similarly, from the other end, to the immediate left of Bûtî is Shâtibi, and to his left is Rida, and these authors engage in an interesting discussion of the distinction between symbolic and worldly rulings (‘ibâdât vs. mu’âmalât). The only author who is not modern is Shâtibi, but he is included because he is the source of systematic and all-important discussions on the aims of the Shari’ah (maqâsid al-Shari’ah) and the aforementioned distinction of symbolic and worldly rulings. For these reasons, he has a deep influence on Bûtî, Rida, and the present author.

Philosophical Hermeneutics

As Eric Hirsch observes, there is a strong case to be made for a general theory of hermeneutics that would be a model or methodology for all textual interpretation rather than applying local hermeneutical theories to limited groupings of texts. A general hermeneutics is desirable because it would offer principles that are always true for textual interpretation. Such a desideratum is perceptible even in the origins of hermeneutics and interpretation. Originally, these were understood to be endeavors for arriving at an understanding of what the gods were saying. Such an understanding would obviously have to be deep and general even if in many cases it was apparent and specific. Hirsch:

Before Schleiermacher introduced the discipline of general hermeneutics, the term "hermeneutics" was used almost exclusively by biblical interpreters, and indeed the name itself suggests a sacred origin, being cognate with Hermes, the messenger of the gods. According to Boeckh, the Greek word ermenia is derived from an older, uncertain root that antedates both the messenger-god and the process of interpreting. It is uncertain, then, whether the god or hermeneutics came first. In any case, Boeckh goes on to say that Hermes is the "mediator between gods and men. He manifests the divine thoughts, translates the infinite into the finite, the divine spirit into sensible appearance. Thus, everything that belongs to the realm of understanding is attributed to him, particularly speech and writing." A similarly sacred association goes with the Latin word interpretatio, and indeed the word interpres, meaning interpreter or mediator, is a normal epithet for Mercury, the Roman version of Hermes. So much for the origin and meaning of hermeneutics, insofar as it has a current meaning. In the past few years, under Heidegger’s spreading influence, the word has become a rather vague, magical talisman, particularly on the Continent.
This account gives us the interpreter as a mediator, and this means that he must fulfill two natural functions. The first is to understand the message and the second is to explain it. Hermes or Mercury would have to understand the message of the gods and then explain it to men. Similarly, a human interpreter must understand what the text is saying and then explain that meaning to others. What we will see in the following pages is that these two functions are often confused so that the interpreter will often understand the text in the way that he wants to explain it. It will be critical for us to maintain these functions as distinct and to see understanding as the prior act which is then followed by the act of explaining.

The very purpose of hermeneutics is to perfect the art of understanding. When the gods sent a message, the thing of first importance was to understand what they were saying. Certainly since Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the focus of hermeneutics has been on listening and understanding. We must listen before we speak. Schleiermacher wrote that the interpreter must step out of his own frame of mind and into that of the author. Empathy and understanding is the first business of hermeneutics. It is a driving force of Hans Georg Gadamer’s (1900-2002) work that the voice of the other not be forced to fit into our prior categories. We must nurture the habit of listening and not assume that what the other is saying will match our ready-made and pre-prepared concepts. Gadamer: ‘Hermeneutics is above all ... the art of understanding ... In it what one has to exercise above all is the ear ... It is the other who breaks into my ego-centeredness and gives me something to understand. This ... motif guided me from the beginning ...’ (emphasis added). If anything, Emilio Betti (1890-1968) and Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) place even greater emphasis on understanding. In the spirit of Gadamer, Betti calls for open-mindedness and the cultivation of sensitivity or receptivity. He deeply values the ethical virtues of patience, tolerance, openness, attentiveness, self-effacement, humility, desire or will to understand, and respect for the other. Betti: ‘Nothing is of greater importance to humankind than living in mutual understanding with one’s fellow human beings’. Betti is critical not only of a science that imposes a conceptual framework on nature thereby seeing nature through pre-formed self-centered ideas but also of a hermeneutics that imposes an experiential framework on the other thereby seeing the other through pre-formed self-centered experiences. In science, the pre-formed conceptual world of the self assimilates nature, while in hermeneutics it assimilates the other into the pre-formed life-world of the self. The solution is not to abandon science and hermeneutics but to nurture a self-critical humility and to avoid self-righteousness and an uncritical conformity.

Given that understanding is the critical prior act, in the case of the Quran we will need to have a sense of the context in which the act of textual understanding takes place. As I have said, part of the context is that given by membership in the narrow discourse community of rational Muslim theists. As members of this community, this group of interpreters believes that the author of the Quranic text is God. So the context is given by rational Muslim theists interpreting God’s word. Such a context creates a critical role for rational psychology. We cannot understand the life and/or mind of the author (because it is God) and so our hermeneutical task is severely constrained by epistemic limits. Given epistemic limits we must fall back on rational psychology. All of this is reminiscent of sections 1-4 where we were similarly faced with epistemic limits (in understanding the universe) and had to fall back on rational psychology. As already explained, the principles of rational psychology available to the rational Muslim theist are simplicity, sufficient reason and trust. So whether it is epistemic
limits in relation to the universe or God’s word, the rational Muslim theist must fall back on simplicity, sufficient reason, and trust.

What kind of textual understanding can these psychological principles give us? My answer is that these principles give us a literalist understanding. Let’s take an example. In the Quran, God is fond of repeating that He is mālik (owner and king) and we are ‘abd (slaves and servants). I assume that the simplest reading of such frequent reminders is the literal one, namely, that God owns us and rules us and that we are His slaves and servants. But we don’t have to go with the simple reading if we can take refuge from the principle of simplicity in the principle of sufficient reason. So the question is whether we have sufficient reason to believe that God does not want us to understand our relation with Him through the master-slave metaphor. One possible candidate for such a sufficient reason is the New Testament that refers to God as Father thus evoking the softer father-child metaphor for God’s relation to us. The text of the New Testament is admissible as a possible sufficient reason because Muslim theists believe that it is at least in part divine. However, because the Quran is the final authority and word for Muslim theists, the New Testament cannot give us a sufficient reason to shelve the Quranic metaphor in favor of a Biblical one. In any case, the Biblical metaphor does not seem to be a deeply substantive one and the Bible also gives the substantive impression that man is a creature and servant of God. Are there other candidates for sufficient reasons against the simple reading? No, because the rest of the Muslim tradition tends to reinforce the master-slave metaphor. I think that the Bible was our last hope because it is the only independent access we have to the mind of the Muslim God. Because we are human beings we should not lay claim to the ability to directly read the mind of God especially on matters as specific as which metaphors apply where. Given our epistemic limits, this would be a dubious ability indeed. In the end, epistemic limits push us back onto the simple reading for lack of a sufficient reason to read the text in any other way. In what follows, I will refer to this dynamic as the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason). The act of understanding takes place within the context of a dynamic created by strict epistemic limits and deep psychological loyalties, a dynamic that gives rational impetus to literalism.

We just witnessed an act of understanding with regard to the mālik-‘abd metaphor. As I have said, all the while we must be careful to keep the functions of understanding and explaining distinct and separate. We should also importantly be aware that the art of explaining (ars explicandi) has traditionally included the application of text to life. As Hirsch writes:

The public side of interpretation-the ars explicandi-is obviously not a monolithic enterprise. It includes... also what [Biblical scholars] have traditionally called applicatio. Interpretation includes... the question, What use or value does [the text] have: how is its meaning applied to me, to us, to our particular situation? The most obvious example of applicatio would be the Sunday sermon that interprets and applies a biblical text, or the legal decision that interprets and applies a law, or the literary essay that describes "what Huckleberry Finn means to us, today." The chief direct value of interpretation is found in this applicatio, not in pure interpretatio alone. Nonetheless, interpretatio is an indispensable foundation for an indefinite number of tasks of applicatio, which it implicitly precedes just as understanding precedes explanation.
So the art of understanding (ars intelligendi) is a distinct foundation for the art of explaining (ars explicandi) but the word interpretatio fuses the two functions. Within interpretation (interpretatio), the art of explaining (ars explicandi) includes application (applicatio). Obviously, serious problems arise when these functions are confused and I will argue that Muslim interpreters often confuse them. For example, let’s consider the hermeneutics of Fazlur Rahman, an author that I will engage deeply in Chapter 2 because I believe that his theory represents one of the most effective combinations of philosophical sophistication and realistic hermeneutics.

Rahman makes two serious errors with regard to the act of understanding. The first is that he believes that the interpreter can attain an objective understanding of God’s meanings. Rahman does precious little to explain how such an incredible understanding is possible, how we can overcome epistemic limits to understand God’s meanings. In other words, he does little to justify why the act of understanding ought to take place in a hermeneutical context that is so different from that of the narrow discourse community described above. Second, Rahman posits an impersonal moral law and gives it a role in the act of textual understanding. Again, he does not really explain why we ought to posit a moral law when, as members of the narrow discourse community, we have already posited the existence of an omnipotent moral person.

Let’s listen to Rahman as he articulates the first error:

In modern hermeneutical theory, the “objectivity school” has insisted that one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study. According to E. Betti, a contemporary representative of this school, the process of understanding is a “reversal” of the original creative process: the forms that we try to understand and interpret now are to be led back to the creative mind whose original contents they were, not as isolated items but as a coherent whole, and made to live again in the mind of the understanding subject. 34

In the rest of this passage, Rahman makes clear that his aim is to understand the mind of the author of the Quran. Beyond my incredulity at Rahman’s aim of understanding God’s mind, I am quite suspicious of his use of the “objectivity school”. The “objectivity school” seems to have its origins in the work of Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher introduced a holistic approach in hermeneutics, an approach that was concerned not only with linguistic and grammatical interpretation but also with an interpersonal dimension. Beyond rules of grammar the interpreter was required to have a sense of the author’s thinking and intentions. The interpretive project could approach completion only when ‘a complete knowledge of the language’ was combined with ‘a complete knowledge of the person’. He thought that it was ‘necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides’.35 He could argue for an objective interpretation to the extent that it was possible to combine an understanding of language and author. He thought it essential for the interpreter to step into the author’s frame of mind but how is that possible without knowledge of the history and environment of the author. Given this insistence on understanding the author, it is obvious that Schleiermacher is offering a hermeneutics for cases of human authorship. In a famous sentence, he insisted that an interpreter must ‘understand the text at first as well as or even better than its author.’36 However, Schleiermacher was writing in the context of Biblical hermeneutics which is importantly different from Quranic hermeneutics. Schleiermacher’s view suggests that ‘with the benefit of scholarly research, the distance of history, and the ability to
stand back from his social and cultural milieu, we may be able to understand Paul’s epistles 
**even better than he understood them himself**. Our research may give us an awareness of 
things that Paul could not have had given his closeness to the events he experienced. Notice 
that this sort of reasoning cannot be straightforwardly transferred to the Quran because Paul 
is a human author and Allah is not. Another German scholar, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), was 
deeply influenced by Schleiermacher and advanced the “objectivity school” with his view that 
the act of understanding is ‘an attempt to recreate the creative process of the writer or 
artist.’ But even this proponent of the “objectivity school” does not seem to support 
Rahman’s use of it. For Dilthey, “the interpreter gains understanding of the writer or text (the 
“other”) by a process of “re-living” (Nacherleben) experience on the basis of “empathy” 
(Hineinversetzen). Thus we come to understand, and to understand ourselves, in the social 
activity of reading in interpretive communities, and not through solitary introspection.” 
Again, it is utterly obvious that Dilthey’s view is targeted at human authors. I find Rahman’s co-
opting of the “objectivity school” quite suspicious because of the unarticulated assumption 
that we can understand the Quran as well as its author (misinterpreting Schleiermacher) and 
that we can somehow “re-live” God’s experience on the basis of “empathy” (misinterpreting 
Dilthey). But what is worse is that Rahman misreads Emilio Betti, the theorist he approvingly 
cites in the passage above. Betti is absolutely clear that the mind doing the interpreting must 
be of equal stature with the mind being interpreted, so much so that he makes this one of his 
four canons of interpretation. Randy Maddox summarizes Betti’s canons of interpretation in 
the following way:

As suggested, Betti tries to overcome such subjectivist leanings and guarantee correct 
interpretation by stressing the autonomous meaning of the text - apart from its 
subjective meaning for the interpreter. To carry out this project, he proposes four 
canons of interpretation. First, there is the canon of the autonomy of the object of 
interpretation. Betti insists here that the original author’s intention is determinative of 
the meaning of the text. Second, comes the canon of totality which requires the 
interpreter to read sections of a text in light of the whole. Third, is the canon of 
actualized understanding. Here Betti accepts part of the subjectivism of Bultmann by 
agreeing that the interpreter’s task is to retrace the creative process, to reconstruct it 
within himself or herself and to retranslate the extraneous thought of an Other into 
the actuality of one’s own life. Note, however, that it is the thought of the Other which 
governs this ‘subjective’ step. Thus, it is a very restricted subjectivism. Finally, there is 
the canon of the harmonization of understanding which argues that only a mind of 
equal stature and congenial disposition can understand another mind in a meaningfully 
adquate way. Thus, an interpreter must seek to develop such a mind-set (italics 
added).

So the interpreting mind has to be of equal stature to the mind being interpreted. But this is 
impossible if God is the author. Rahman’s misreading of the objectivity school is on such an 
obvious point that one cannot help but wonder what his possible motive could be. In the next 
chapter, I argue that his motive is to advance his particular brand of liberal hermeneutics and 
that such a motive really explains why he co-opts the objectivity school in such an incorrect 
manner. It is critical to observe what he has done. He has actually altered the structure of the 
hermeneutical context in which the act of understanding takes place. For the narrow discourse 
community, the act of understanding takes place in a context of strict epistemic limits because
we cannot read the mind of God. Rahman alters this context with his view that we can read God’s mind thus removing the strict epistemic limits. He supports this move with an incorrect use of the objectivity school. What we see is that the motive of explaining a liberal reading may have caused Rahman to alter the context of the act of understanding. This is the confusion of the two functions of interpretation (understanding and explaining) that was warned against earlier. As I said, it is critical to see these functions, especially the prior act of understanding, as distinct and separate.

Rahman’s second error with regard to the act of understanding is to posit a moral law when he has already accepted the existence of an omnipotent moral person. As a result, we must ask why he feels the need for this further metaphysical entity. For Rahman, the moral law is a part of God but we do not get an explanation from him as to why God should have such an anatomy. Why should we not see God along the more natural lines of possessing moral virtues in the way that human beings do? Here again, we get a sense that the moral law allows Rahman to alter the hermeneutical context of the act of understanding. Because the moral law makes it possible to directly grasp objective moral principles in the way that Kant envisaged, it allows us to have direct epistemic access to the moral principles in God’s mind. Thus, we can know what moral principles God was aiming to establish through the Quran and we can keep them in mind during the act of textual understanding. The problem with all this is that the moral law is an artificial addition to the context of understanding and Rahman gives the narrow discourse community no reason to make the addition. Again, we see that the motive of explaining a liberal reading is confused with what ought to be the pure function of understanding.

The practice of allowing one’s worldview to influence one’s understanding of text (broadly construed) is as old as human society. Before the Enlightenment, ecclesial and dogmatic concerns dominated Biblical interpretation. Enlightenment rationalism brought with it an increasing anxiety about the existence of God, and so hermeneutics gradually began to move out of the Church and into the academy where the Bible was approached with learning and skepticism. As a discipline, hermeneutics made a gradual transition from religious to secular, its concerns shifting from theology to philosophy. This created freedom from the ecclesial and dogmatic concerns of the Church. A higher standard of objectivity became a desideratum that was attainable through a philosophical and scientific approach. This was progress because it challenged the assumptions and pre-understandings that mired Church interpretation. In the 18th century, the march of reason and the insistence on “empirical” reading seriously eroded the authority of the Bible. It was subjected to ‘the common rules of grammar and logic.’ It was studied as a literature of antiquity and as a history of the Hebrew peoples rather than as sacred text. The beautiful Hebrew poetry of the Bible was explained away by the fact that ancient rites of worship had aroused profound emotional feeling and poetic inspiration in the human mind. The miraculous life of Jesus was explained away by the layers of later interpretations and cultural accretions that had buried the actual historical figure, and something akin to a historical/literary excavation was needed to scrape away the layers in order to arrive at the truth. In short, a hermeneutics of faith had given way to a hermeneutics of suspicion. An 18th century German professor of theology, Johann Semler (1725-91), seems to require of his students ‘a willing suspension of religious belief and the acquiring of particular skills as they got down to their critical task.’ Semler’s work represented a shift of paradigm to Enlightenment rationalism, but the paradigm shifted again
in the 20th century with Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) realization that scientific pre-understandings could also distort interpretation. In our day, most people have scientific preconceptions, and for good reason, but Heidegger’s hermeneutics has made an important contribution in challenging such preconceptions at least in theory. This challenge directly resulted in a far more thoughtful and balanced response in the form of Betti’s hermeneutics that challenges both the Enlightenment’s “scientific” hermeneutics and Heidegger’s “existential” hermeneutics. For Betti, the problem is a self-centeredness that makes it difficult to attain an understanding whether of nature or of the Other. While this self-centeredness could be the result of scientific preconceptions it can also be the result of preconceptions that are formed on the basis of life experience. The solution is not to abandon science and hermeneutics but to become self-critically aware and avoid self-righteousness and an uncritical conformity.

Gadamer (d. 2002) was a student of Heidegger (d. 1976) and he wrote his main work after Betti (d. 1968). Some of his work could be seen to lay the foundations for a postmodern hermeneutics, for example, his view that consciousness is a mere ‘flickering in the closed circuit of historical time’ and that in the hermeneutical game there is a ‘primacy of the play over the player’, in other words, the interpreter is submerged by a swelling flood of tradition that emanates from the text. This led to his view that there could be no objectively valid understanding of the text and what was really achieved by hermeneutical endeavor was a self-understanding. Gadamer believed that the choice of interpretive norm is what really determined a particular interpretation and he did not seem to believe that there was a method for choosing between norms. The post-modernism that Gadamer seems to have given impetus to also fails to arbitrate between competing interpretive norms because it cannot privilege any given norm without ceasing to be ‘postmodern’. Moreover, postmodernism may undermine the very goals that hermeneutics came to serve if hermeneutical success is defined in terms of defending some specific modern or postmodern ideology (e.g. feminist, Black or other hermeneutics). The original purpose of hermeneutics was to understand messages from the gods and not to use those messages in a manipulative way. The purpose was to listen to and understand another without forcing one’s own voice on the other. Anthony Thistleton writes:

> Whether with Gadamer, we emphasize the place of “the ear” rather than the mouth, or with Betti, the place of patience, humility, tolerance, restraint, and respect for the other, or with Ricoeur, the ontological structure of selfhood as relational and implicitly inter-subjective, hermeneutics is not the way of self-assertion, self-affirmation and a “mastery” that understands the other in terms of self and self-interest.

Thus, it is critical to take a step back from postmodernism in order to recover the true purpose of hermeneutics. Betti gives us a natural starting point as he responds both to Enlightenment rationalism and to Heidegger. His views are built upon by E.D. Hirsch although this may be in the narrower context of a development of method. However, Hirsch’s hermeneutical theory is more than sufficient for our own narrow purposes.

Hirsch is very convincing on the point that hermeneutics is an empirical discipline and that the act of understanding is not an arbitrary one. Interpreters are not free to choose any
interpretive norm they may fancy. Interpretive norms are not all on a single continuum so that it does matter which one we choose. Hirsch articulates the position of his opponents as follows:

As I understand [my opponents’] account, the norms of interpretation exist on a single continuum. Such norms as the author's intention, the socially most useful meaning, the most interesting meaning, the beautiful meaning, the most relevant meaning, the meaning most applicable to one's own life, the meaning that one is in the mood for, the meaning that corresponds to one's assumptions about life, etc. are all equally possible candidates. The norm that one chooses is not a matter of the nature of interpretation itself, but of ad hoc appropriateness to the situation and purpose at hand. (So far this way of describing the matter parallels "situational ethics"). The problem of justifying interpretive theories is therefore that of making a rational, grounded selection of a norm that is suitable to a situation or purpose.48

The hermeneutical theory described in the passage allows the interpreter’s situation or purpose to justify his selection of an interpretive norm. If we subscribed to such a theory then we could have no objection to Rahman choosing, say, the interpretive norm of the socially most useful meaning as long as this was a choice in harmony with his situation or purpose. But Hirsch offers a convincing argument against precisely such a subjectivist theory of hermeneutics, an argument that grounds a view of hermeneutics as an empirical discipline that can be advanced through professional scholarly practice. Of the interpretive norms mentioned in the passage above, the norm of author’s intention is, for Hirsch, on a different plane from the others. It is a higher order norm because if the interpreter chooses to abide by it then he has handed over responsibility for choosing any subsequent interpretive norms to the author of the text. In other words, rather than directly choosing one of the interpretive norms mentioned above, the interpreter allows the author of the text to make that choice. Thus, authorial intent is a norm that determines our choice of other norms. Moreover, it is a focal point for historical (empirical) investigation because our view of what the author intended can change with the discovery of new evidence. So the interpreter’s choice of norms is no longer subjective or arbitrary because it depends on empirical investigation of authorial intent. This echoes Betti’s concern for preserving the ‘autonomous meaning of the text’ so that the text cannot have whatever meaning the interpreter chooses depending on his situation or purpose but rather it has a meaning independently determined by its author (recall Betti’s first canon). Responding to the objection that the norm of authorial intent is also subjective because it is also (subjectively) chosen by the interpreter, Hirsch illustrates the soundness of his argument with a colorful analogy:

Suppose we are playing poker and must decide which sub-code shall govern the game. It is up to the dealer to decide. Shall it be “seven-card-stud” or “five-card-draw,” etc.? The dealer could choose any available sub-code of poker, and it would then be his choice. But suppose he said this: “The club's founder wanted us to follow a certain pattern of poker playing. Let's consult the information he left about his wishes, and see what sub-code he wanted us to use under these circumstances. That will be the code we will use.” Here it is not the dealer's reasoned preference for a sub-code that governs his decision, but rather his principle for a way of choosing principles. Any post-
Russellian logician will confirm that a principle for selecting principles is on a different plane from the principles themselves... This is not mere logic-chopping. It makes a very practical difference in the world, nothing less than the difference between a nonhistorical, a priori approach to interpretation, and an historical, a posteriori approach to interpretation. It is the difference between the autonomous making of meaning, and an empirical discipline. In the poker game just instanced, the difference between autonomous rule-setting and historical inquiry was obvious. If the dealer had set the rules himself, that would be an end to the matter. The only “inquiry” would be the rather trivial one of deciding whether he was consistently following his own rules. But if he chose the historical principle, mere consistency would be an insignificant part of an inquiry into the intentions of the club’s founder. That could become a genuine historical inquiry. New evidence could turn up, for instance, new information about the context of the founder’s reported conversations, the meanings of words in those days, and so on. And while new evidence might not supply anything beyond what the founder’s writings said, the fact that they might do so is a precious distinction between the a priori and the a posteriori approach to interpretation.49

If Hirsch is right on the priority of authorial intent, and I am convinced that he is, then is it possible to investigate the authorial intent of the Quran given that the author is God? The answer to that is yes. God’s intent can be discerned from what the Prophet and his followers took it to be. The assumption here is that God would have made His intent clear to His Prophet, and that both God and the Prophet would have made that intent clear to the earliest followers of Islam. If you accept that assumption, as members of the narrow discourse community must, then we agree that there is a way to arrive at the authorial intent of the Quran. Notice how different this point is from the one that Rahman makes. He believes that we can have direct access to God’s mind via the moral law. This method is not dissimilar to the discredited intuitionist theory of hermeneutics whereby spiritual communion allows the interpreter to arrive at textual meaning. By contrast, I am advancing the empiricist view that a historical investigation into the thought and practice of the early Muslims can give us insight into God’s intentions.

In chapters 2 and 3, I will often use the example of ribâ to illustrate hermeneutical points. Rahman goes against a simple reading of the Quran that literally bans interest on loans. He is able to read God’s mind (via moral law) and realize that the ban is really restricted to usurious practices. But at the same time he observes that the early Muslim community observed a complete ban on interest:

A natural question arises here, viz., if riba is only that form of usurious transaction which has been described above and if only this form is banned, then why is it that, as an effect of the riba-ordinance of the Qur’an, all interest seems to have been abolished as is, indeed, testified by historical evidence? The answer to this is that we do not hold that in each and every given case of loan, the capital was thus doubled and redoubled – indeed, there must have been a great deal of variation in individual cases depending on circumstances, e.g. the nature of investment, the amount of risk, etc. But what matters is that all these individual cases were part of one riba-system in whose nature it was to be so exorbitantly usurious. Therefore, what had to be banned was the system as a whole, and hence no exceptions could be made in individual
cases. When the entire system was banned, the milder cases within that system were also naturally abolished since the system itself was tyrannical. It cannot, therefore, be argued that since the Qur’an abolished even the milder cases, it must be concluded that the bank-interest of today also stands condemned. This is because the bank-interest of today is a separate kind of system.\(^{50}\)

The point is that the early Muslim community understood the ban on \textit{ribā} to be a complete ban on interest. According to the hermeneutical theory that I am advancing, this understanding of the early community reflects God’s (authorial) intent. By contrast, in the passage above Rahman is making a baseless assumption about divine intent (God against usury only) that then accords with his conclusion in the last two sentences. He claims to know why the Quran banned all interest, viz. it was part of an overall \textit{usurious} system. While that could be some of the reason, there are other possible reasons, for example, maybe God wanted to establish a new economic order, maybe He wanted to empower some types of people and disempower others, or maybe He wanted to give the Muslims a symbol to follow that would distinguish them from other communities, or whatever. If Rahman were sensitive to these other possible divine motives, he would hardly conclude that the bank interest of today does not fall under the Quranic ban because it is a ‘separate kind of system’. The Quranic ban, like Noah’s flood, may have had the purpose of wholesale destruction and reconstruction, who is to say? But there \textit{is} someone who can tell us. It is precisely the early Muslim understanding of the ban (that Rahman eventually sets aside) that reflects the divine intent. Once again, Rahman’s motive of \textit{explaining} the legitimacy of modern banking is getting in the way of what ought to be a pure act of textual \textit{understanding}.

The need for a mediating community (in this case the early Muslims) between the text and its meanings can be understood in a deeper way. The linguistic form of a text can have many different meanings. A set of cultural-linguistic conventions is needed in order to get the text to converge on a narrower set of possible meanings. Of course, in a general way all language naturally aims at the convergence of meaning for otherwise language could not play the critical role that it does in the success of human social life. It allows us to communicate rather than talk passed each other most of the time and for this critical function there has to be convergence of meanings. What often goes unnoticed is how ubiquitous the phenomena of the convergence of meaning really is. At the low level of phonetics, different phonetic sounds will often converge on the same phoneme. Phonetic sounds that are uttered in very different ways for physiological and cultural reasons are still easily understood to stand for the same, self-identical phoneme. It is critical to keep in mind that this convergence on a phoneme is a convergence of \textit{meaning} because the phoneme is a \textit{concept} under which the different phonetic sounds are grouped. Similarly, at the next level, different sets of phonemes will often converge on the very same, self-identical word (e.g., “tomāto” and “tomahō”).\(^{51}\) At a higher level, different words can represent the same, self-identical concept (e.g. “jacket” and “coat”).\(^{52}\) Hirsch:

\begin{quote}
Here I am suggesting that what we call a phoneme is precisely analogous to what we call a meaning. In fact, this is to put the case far too weakly. A phoneme is itself an instance of meaning. We can go further. Just as different phonetic noises can represent the same phoneme, so can different phonemes represent the same word, and different words the same concept. All these are instances of the representation of
\end{quote}
meaning, though at different levels. And in each case a difference at the lower, vehicular level does not necessarily compel a difference at the higher level.\textsuperscript{53}

The point is that these convergences of meaning are to be expected because of cultural-linguistic conventions that reflect the natural role of language in human social life. At the even higher level of sentences and texts, the same phenomenon is observed, and cultural-linguistic conventions ensure the naturally expected convergence of meaning. This is the thrust of the following passage in which Hirsch sets out an argument against a modern perspectivism in interpretation:

Any two speakers of a language make different sounds, often recognizably different ones, and yet they can perceive the different sounds as being linguistically identical, as being the self-same phoneme. Since we are all aware of regional accents, we are not surprised to hear very different noises being made when, say, the Pledge of Allegiance is recited. Yet we do not doubt that these different noises are representing the same, self-identical words... The phoneme, the word, the phrase, the sentence, the text: these are not abstractions; they are the very realities upon which the perspectivist bases his skepticism. He says that we all understand the same text differently, not pausing to observe how remarkable it is that we should all have the same text, the same words, whether in black letter or in roman, whether spoken by an Englishman or an American.\textsuperscript{54}

Hirsch’s point is that if the community has a single text to refer to (as in the case of the Quran) then that is already an amazing demonstration of the convergence of meaning. The linguistic conventions in 7\textsuperscript{th} century Arabia resulted in the convergence of phonetic sounds and phonemes to give us a single Quranic text. So there is no reason to expect that at the level of sentences and text the Quran and its cultural-linguistic background failed to produce a convergence of meaning. The meaning of the Quran is evident in the understanding and practice of the Prophet’s followers. The cultural-linguistic conventions of this earliest of Muslim communities resulted in a convergence of meaning of the Quranic text. As the Quran entered the world it was simultaneously embedded in the cultural-linguistic conventions of the people it addressed. The first act of interpretation is a pure act of understanding and this understanding must proceed within the cultural-linguistic conventions in which the Quran is embedded. As a result, the act of understanding must first give us a default conventional meaning, a meaning that has come down to us from the Prophet and his followers. The meanings of words as understood by the mediating community (earliest Muslims), becomes for us the default, conventional, simple, or literal meaning of the words. Of course, we can deviate from the default, conventional, simple or literal meaning if there is sufficient reason to understand the text in a non-literal way. Such a sufficient reason can be supplied by the mediating community itself or by common sense. For example, Appendix 2 has a critical discussion in which both the earliest Muslims and common sense dictate a non-literal understanding of the Quran’s view of Prophetic authority. All in all, Hirsch’s views serve to underpin a hermeneutical dynamic of the narrow discourse community that gives impetus to the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason).

What is the strength of the rationale for literalism? I think that the point about our epistemic limits is self-evident because we cannot even ascertain that God exists let alone determine what He is thinking. The narrow discourse community does not simply assume that God exists.
It rationally believes that He does and epistemic limits play a critical role in arriving at such belief (sections 1-4 above). Having arrived at faith on the basis of epistemic limits, the narrow discourse community will not transgress such limits during the act of interpretation (on pain of inconsistency). So it will not see any rational justification for Rahman’s transgression of epistemic limits. Moreover, my argument for literalism does not beg questions. I do not claim to have direct access to God’s intention for His text to be read in a literal manner. The literalism I espouse is a default position on any text based on an application of the principle of simplicity to the cultural-linguistic conventions in which the text is embedded. In many instances, our reading should not be a literalist one, but in all such cases there has to be a sufficient reason for that to be so.

6. Trust and the Literalist Imperative

The impetus towards literalist hermeneutics can also be seen from the standpoint of the religious psychology of a believer. Moreover, religious psychology gives us an opportunity to discuss the psychology of trust that builds on the earlier psychological discussions on sufficient reason and simplicity. Believers experience the same epistemic limits as any other human being, and we should always be mindful of these limits, of the fact that we are metaphysically deaf and blind. We cannot hear or see the God we believe in. Now keep in mind that as a metaphysically deaf and blind person, we enter into Islam not because we can hear or see anything but rather because we choose to have deaf-blind trust in the author of the Quran when he says that he is Allah. So it is Allah Whom I trust, and so it is His words that I will hold on to (with all my life and any other metaphysical worth I may possess). Note that deaf-blind trust gives the believer a literalist imperative. There is no verifiable metaphysical access to God’s mind and so the simplest way to interpret His words is the literal way. In terms of the hermeneutical context, given that our belief is in God we know that we have no independent access to His mind, and so epistemic limits force us to fall back on psychological simplicity and read the text in a simple way. In other words, our epistemic limits as interpreters give us literalism.

Sensory experience does not give the believer access to the metaphysical realm and therefore such experience cannot give reliable guidance in matters of faith. Their access to this nonsensory universe is not through sense experience but through the emotion of trust. I enter Islam through trust in Allah and He is, as far as matters of faith are concerned, right at the center of my universe of trust. Errors of interpretation usually result from a failure to see both that it is the believer’s interpretation that (practically) matters and that for the believer it is his universe of trust that plays the crucial role in interpretation. For the believer, the single most important question is ‘who can I trust in my metaphysical affairs?’ Much of this question can be answered through a simple process of elimination. Eliminate all human beings including the prophets because they have no access through their own means to the metaphysical realm. Eliminate all supernatural beings that are either untruthful, lack knowledge, or can offer no useful advice vis-à-vis our metaphysical destiny. What are we left with? For the rational person on the threshold of Islamic faith the answer is Allah and only Allah. Their entire faith is built upon a rational trust that the author and creator of Islam is who he claims to be – Allah, All-knowing, All-powerful, Eternal Lord of all the worlds. Thus at the center of their universe of trust the rational believer finds herself (obviously) and no one else other than Allah. It is critical
to observe that neither the Quran nor the Prophet, are at the center of a believer’s universe of trust. Trust is an interpersonal emotion and religious faith is a matter of having trust in a supernatural person. The Quran is not a person and the Prophet is not supernatural (and will not have very good skills at navigating us through a metaphysical realm in which he is also deaf and blind). So Allah as supernatural person is the only object and basis of faith.\textsuperscript{56}

Such faith may be attained via religious experience or historical, scientific, and philosophical study, or, as in most cases, via some combination of these. One may not be conscious of the process through which faith enters the heart but as it enters it begins to change the way we look at the Quran and the Prophet. The point being made here is that for the rational believer trust in Allah is logically prior to trust in His words or His Prophet (because only Allah has the proper metaphysical credentials). True, I may have arrived at faith through a study of the Quran and some trust in the words and deeds of Muhammad, but the act of faith is an act of direct (deaf-blind) trust in Allah and is only partially aided by the trustworthiness of Muhammad. Obviously, we do what the Quran and the Prophet tell us to because we believe that this is what \textit{Allah} wants. Interpretation through the eyes of a believer (in Allah) is the only method that is rational and anything else would be betrayal of our deepest emotions (including, of course, trust).\textsuperscript{57}

That we read the Quran through eyes of trust is reminiscent of the prior disposition of reverence in a reader that many Christian interpreters (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Schleiermacher) thought necessary in order to properly understand the Bible. The point that this approach to the Quran is rational - because it is rational to feel the emotion of trust\textsuperscript{58} - may offer a clearer justification for the views of these Christian interpreters. Having rationally chosen a metaphysical guide it is now rational to trust Him as we read the literary work that He inspired. Take a look at what a learned Christian interpreter has to say:

\begin{quote}
In the Holy Scripture, truth is to be looked for rather than fair phrases. All sacred scriptures should be read in the spirit in which they were written. In them therefore we should seek food for our souls rather than subtleties of speech... But curiosity often hinders us in the reading of the Scriptures, for we try to examine and dispute over matters that we should pass over and accept in simplicity. If you desire to profit, read with humility, simplicity, and faith and have no concern to appear learned. Ask questions freely, and listen in silence to the words of the Saints; hear with patience the parables of the fathers, for they are not told without good cause. (Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471), \textit{The Imitation of Christ})\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

From this passage, I want to draw the lesson that the rationality of trust must sometimes override the rationality of an unrelenting intellectualism. The passage frowns upon the analytical task of examination and discussion. The wisdom being imparted at the end of the passage is that we must be patient in \textit{listening} to and \textit{hearing} the word of God. Reading the Bible ‘is not to indulge in flights of learning, but rather a “paying attention” and an exercise in \textit{listening} to the saints and the fathers’ through whom God speaks. Simplicity and humility is given priority over learning and speculation (over allegorical interpretation). The posture of simplicity, humility, patience, listening, and hearing, all point towards an attitude of \textit{receiving} wisdom but not with an intellectually restless spirit. Another Christian interpreter (Karl Barth (1886-1968)) sees the Bible as a call to action and too much struggling to understand can actually prevent us from hearing that call.\textsuperscript{60} In such wisdom lies a strong tendency towards
literalism because we are being asked to pay attention to something much deeper than the various possible meanings of this or that word or phrase. In order to grasp the real message we must avoid the ‘subtleties of speech’. We are to read with simplicity rather than a restless interpretive spirit.

The psychology of trust is nourished also by direct speech. Martin Luther held the view that the reader confronts the sacred text alone without the intervention of the church and that in much of the Bible (e.g. psalms) Christ speaks to each of us directly. This intimate context is one that nurtures the reader’s trust in the sacred author. Such a context is welcomed even more so by the Quran that self-proclaims that it is in simple language and easy to understand thus inviting all readers to engage it directly. Its religious genre is that of a deity speaking to any one of His creatures that will listen. From an aesthetic point of view it is simply beautiful that God should speak to each of us directly. But considerations of beauty aside, direct speech actually strengthens the impetus to literalism. As the barriers between God and believer dissolve in the act of reading, as we come within ‘earshot’ of the ‘speaker’, it becomes very difficult to come away with anything other than a literal interpretation. If God tells me to stand then I will stand up on my feet. Unless given a sufficient reason otherwise, I will not have any reason to believe that God means something else, for example, I will not believe that He wants me to stand up for a cause (rather than on my feet), this last being a needless complication that goes against simplicity. If I were lying or sitting down and God said “STAND!” then I would feel very guilty if I did not jump to my feet because of the lame excuse that “STAND!” can also be interpreted to mean something else such as ‘stand for justice.’ This is a crucial psychological point. From the standpoint of human psychology the genre of direct speech elicits trust and trust is simple and gives impetus to a simple reading if there is lack of sufficient reason to interpret otherwise.

But why do we trust that the Quran is God’s word in the first place? As rational theists, we arrived at our belief in God because we allowed the emotion of trust to flow freely. As a result, the river of trust already has a deep and powerful current in it when it is time to consider the authorship of the Quran. We must trust the Quran when it says that it is God’s word unless there is sufficient reason not to. Such a sufficient reason could take one of two forms. Either there is sufficient historical evidence that Muhammad had the Quran from some worldly source(s) or there is sufficient historical evidence that the Quran was corrupted after he introduced it to the world in the early 7th century.61 The evidence for either possibility is very scant and very far from sufficient. However, in order to avoid wading into either debate we need only make the weaker claim that the evidence for either possibility is not sufficient. There is a wide scholarly consensus on this weaker claim, and to note that is adequate for our purposes because the weaker claim is all that we need to secure the rationality of trust in the divine authorship of the Quran (trust prevails because there is no sufficient reason against it).62

7. Four Interpretive Strategies

In its confrontation with European modernity in the 19th and 20th century, traditional Islam suffered heavy losses.63 In the centuries leading up to this confrontation, Europe had nurtured the spirit of free inquiry, creativity, and innovation. She had learned to value philosophical and scientific thought. Militaristic, technological, and economic competition between her states had also given impetus to the destruction of traditional barriers to progress. By the twentieth
century, Western sociopolitical systems were reliably distilling native talent to positions of leadership in all walks of life. This is a quality Islamic societies had not possessed since the very early Islamic period. As the twentieth century progressed, modern education became widely accessible in the West fuelling rapid growth and innovation. Views on gender also evolved as it became clear that women had capacities similar to men, and, this was especially so with the evolution of information-based economies with mental labor replacing physical labor as the key economic input.

Europe’s greatest strength was Islam’s greatest weakness. Traditional Islam did not nurture free inquiry, creativity, and innovation. Islamic societies were characterized by imitation (taqlid) and stagnation. When Europeans arrived on their shores, the Muslims had not only to contend with superior military technology. European superiority was cultural, being rooted in the ability of a culture to realize human potential. So it is not only that the Muslims lost battles and territories and were subjected to new systems of administration. The Muslims lost a cultural war. They had no answer to the educated, independent, and disciplined man Europe had produced. With no vision of their own, Muslims had nothing worthwhile to give them common cause for struggle.

The helplessness of Islam in the face of modernity led to an inevitable loss of authority of traditional Islam and its longstanding guardians – the ulema. As increasing numbers of Muslims experienced the onslaught of modernity many realized that strength must be sought in something other than traditional Islam. The ulema and their tremendous learning of the middle Islamic tradition (classical period onwards) seemed hardly to be of any practical value in negotiating modernity. For this reason, an impulse to directly consult the primal sources of Islam (Quran and Sunna) that had in any case been gathering momentum at the end of the 18th century grew into a powerful revivalist movement. The main interpretive strategy of revivalist Islam is not different from that of traditional Islam. Both these forms of Islam share the basic interpretive strategy of literalism. The real difference is in the fact that revivalist Islam applies this strategy directly to the primal sources and does so with considerable gusto. Literalism will be the first of four interpretive strategies that we will discuss in this thesis.

Revivalism also contained the germ for another form of Islam, namely, modernism. Perhaps first discernible in the Indian revivalist Shah WaliUllah (1703 – 62), modernism shares with revivalism a disregard of the middle Islamic tradition and a focus on the primal sources. However, modernism offers a more humanist and thoughtful reading of these sources with the aim of finding a harmony between Islamic sources and Western modernity. Islamic modernism is often disparaging of tradition and its interpretive strategy of literalism. Modernists have offered many strategies for breaking down traditional barriers, especially the barrier of literalism. While these proposals are numerous, three distinct conceptual trends can be discerned. The first trend places emphasis on human necessity and public interest as principles that override literal interpretation. The second trend places emphasis on liberal principles (e.g. freedom, egalitarianism) that are seen as universal and that must therefore override literal interpretation. The third trend places emphasis on humanist values (e.g. social justice, democratic norms) that reflect human collective wisdom attained after millennia of historical experience and that must therefore sit judgment on any literal interpretation. Following Hallaq, we can usefully call the first trend utilitarianism and the second liberalism. The third
trend could be given the obvious label of humanism. The four interpretive strategies we will discuss are thus literalism, utilitarianism, liberalism, and humanism.70

The 19th century Egyptian reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) could be seen as the inspiration for all three modernist trends because of his emphasis on the priority of reason over revelation.71 In ‘Abduh’s thought, considerations of utility were elevated from a subordinate position in traditional legal theory to being a guide in the process of legal reasoning.72 I will take his main student, Rashid Rida (d. 1935), as the main representative of utilitarianism. Rida made a distinction between ritual (‘ibādāt) and worldly practice (mu’āmalāt) arguing that Islamic rituals were perfected in the 7th century but that matters of worldly practice were subject to reason because of changing world realities. Considerations of utility (human necessity and public interest) had to be paramount so that changing realities could be given due consideration in determining worldly practice. For Rida, even textual evidence that was certain could be overridden by considerations of necessity and interest.73 For example, a literal reading of the Quran unequivocally supports a prohibition on interest. But Rida proposed that this prohibition be set aside because the public good lies with the interest based economy.74 In other words, Rida implied that the public good could be a sufficient reason to override the ban on interest. The problem with this is that the argument that the interest economy is in the public good is mired in controversy. Thus, much like the Christian tradition that is also mired in controversy and cannot be seen as a sufficient reason to block the application of simplicity against the Trinity (see Appendix 1), the controversial argument that interest banking is good for us cannot be a sufficient reason to go against the simple reading of the Quran that gives us a ban on interest. If Rida had understood that he was up against as powerful a principle as that of simplicity he probably would not have relied on such a controversial argument to supply a sufficient reason. On the whole, Rida’s view suffers from two serious problems. First, it does not engage the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason) but simply offers its own alternative for interpreting the Quran. Second, it is not clear how human necessity and public interest are determined so that the interpretive strategy is vulnerable to the charge of relativism.75

‘Abduh’s idea that reason operating independent of revelation can discern right and wrong is embodied in liberalism.76 I will take Fazlur Rahman as the main representative of this trend. Rahman develops this Kantian notion of reason discerning right from wrong into a comprehensive interpretive strategy.77 Reason is aware of the moral law. Because of this, when we understand the text of the Quran in the historical context of its revelation, we can discern the universal moral principles that the Prophet was applying to 7th century Arab society. With the moral principles in hand, our work is now only to apply them to modern society. For Rahman, the universal moral law must override any specific textual evidence. The case of interest lending again offers a useful illustration. Study of the Quran in its original context gives Rahman the moral principle of socioeconomic justice. Applying this to modern society, he finds that modern interest banking does not compromise socioeconomic justice but rather advances it (for example, through development banking). Thus, the moral principle has priority over the textual evidence against interest. Rahman’s view basically suffers from the same problems as Rida’s. First, he does not directly challenge the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason) but simply offers his own alternative for interpreting the Quran. The fact is that he needs a sufficient reason to override the simple reading that gives us a ban on interest, but he offers the controversial (thus inadequate)
argument that interest banking does not compromise socioeconomic justice. Second, having loosened the hermeneutical tie to the text, the extent to which Rahman’s legal theory can be called Islamic is unclear. Moreover, it is not clear how the universal moral law is discerned (for example, can we all agree that egalitarianism is a universal moral principle?). Nor is it clear that once moral principles are discerned, in what way they apply to modern society. Following our example, one could easily argue against Rahman that an application of the principle of socioeconomic justice requires prohibiting interest not establishing it. Thus, Rahman’s interpretive strategy is, like Rida’s, vulnerable to the charge of relativism.

While Rahman maintains that individual reason is not in need of religion in order to discern right from wrong, Sorough makes the same point regarding collective reason. For Sorouch, an (extra-religious) collective humanist wisdom/rationality that has been acquired through the furnace of millennia of historical experience dictates values such as democracy, social justice and human rights. This collective rationality has all the moral resources needed to create stable liberal democracies that have no dependence on the moral resources of religion. In religious societies, such an independent collective reason passes judgment on religion and forces it into a minimalist position. Sorough believes that collective reason is our moral compass and also the basis for establishing the necessary systems of democracy, justice, and human rights in religious societies. For such societies, he does not advocate a secular government although the religious government that he does advocate follows a minimalist religion, is democratic, and accepts an irreducible religious pluralism. Collective reason allows only for a minimal religion that does not include an ancient system of law or fiqh. In the case of our riba example, collective reason passes judgment on every fiqh ruling (including riba) and decides whether it should continue to apply in our times. Thus, collective reason has priority over the textual evidence against interest. In this matter, Sorough is open to the same criticisms as Rahman and Rida. First, he does not directly challenge the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason) but simply offers his own alternative for interpreting the Quran. The fact is that he needs a sufficient reason to override the simple reading that gives us a ban on interest, but in a highly controversial move he dispenses with ancient fiqh altogether by declaring that essential Islam is a minimal religion making minimal claims that do not include the ancient rulings of fiqh. Second, having severed the hermeneutical tie to the text in a manner that is far more radical than Rahman, it is not clear how his legal theory can retain the Islamic character of the law, in other words, it is not clear in what sense the law can any longer be said to be Islamic. Moreover, it is not clear how collective reason determines modern human rights (for example, does collective rationality establish gay rights?). Thus, Sorough’s interpretive strategy is, like Rahman’s and Rida’s, vulnerable to the charge of relativism.

As Hallaq observes, authors such as Rida, Rahman, and Sorouch are far too uncritical of modernity and its ways. For example, is interest banking really such a wonderful institution or should it rather be seen to create all sorts of system-wide problems (third world debt and exploitation, hyper-finance and over consumption, war finance, resource depletion, and so on). It is to the mind that fails to problematize modernity that escape from the shackles of literalism is most appealing. Is this a case where one set of shackles (literalism) is simply being replaced by another (modernity)? Undoubtedly, modernity has its full share of evil. Thus, an escape from literalism may not be a solution because of a failure to identify the real problem.
One thing is clear. Traditionalism, with its smothering of reason, is a real problem. So we can follow most other reformers and begin our journey with its demolition. In this thesis, I will sever the historical link between literalism and a rigid traditionalism. I will offer an alternative form of literalism that is not tradition-bound in delivering its interpretation of the Quran. This is an interpretation that opens Muslim societies to free inquiry, creativity, and innovation. My final position will be to argue in favor of such a literalism. To recap, the historical literalism-traditionalism connection will be severed, traditionalism will be jettisoned, and literalism will be freed in order to establish a new connection. This new connection will be between literalism and open philosophical inquiry. Such literalism does not suffer from the problems of utilitarianism, liberalism, and humanism. In particular, it is not vulnerable to the charge of relativism because as a form of literalism it preserves a hermeneutical tie to the primary texts of Islam. The thinker who will be my main representative of this view is not modern but I believe that his views have not been improved upon in any significant way by any modern thinker. The representative of literalism will be Abu Ishāq al-Shāṭībi (d. 1388 A.D) though the final view I offer will be different from his in important ways. Shāṭībi accepts that utilitarian thinking aimed at the greater good is an important method for decision making in legal theory but asserts that the revealed text must set limits to its application. In other words, he argues for a critical role for revelation in prescribing limits to reason and allows the literal text to set those limits. The advantages of Shāṭībi’s view are that 1) he captures the Islamic character of the law by strengthening its ties to Islamic texts and 2) emphasizes religious obedience and morality (ta’abud) as the permanent inspiration and basis for law and life and thus not subject to current utilitarian, liberal, or humanist notions of the good. A disadvantage of his view is that in contrast to utilitarianism, liberalism, and humanism he places limits on reason that are textual and would seem to smother the spirit of rational inquiry. In the final view that I present, the text will not set limits on reason but rather reason must define its own limits and it will do so by autonomously discovering a role for revelation. It is the work of this thesis to attempt to show that a view such as Shāṭībi’s need not fall into the abyss of closing Islam’s doors to open philosophical inquiry.

8. Textualism vs. Reason

As noted in the previous section, the (rational) literalism outlined in Section 5 above and offered as my final hermeneutical position in Chapter 4 has little in common with a tradition-bound literalism. In the present section, we will see that it also has little in common with a text-bound literalism. As just noted, textualist literalism could be described more precisely as text-bound (literalism) rather than tradition-bound (literalism) and so it is possible to make the difference between textualism and traditionalism. Rigid textualism fails to be open to sufficient reasons to abandon a given text while rigid traditionalism fails to be open to sufficient reasons to abandon a given tradition. In this section, we will discuss rigid textualism (rigid traditionalism is discussed in detail in Appendix 2).

By far the best representative of textualism in the Islamic fiqh tradition is the zāhirī school of thought founded by Dāwūd bin Ali bin Khalaf (201/816 – 270/884). Dāwūd introduced a methodology in fiqh that focused on the literal word of God to the exclusion of other ways of thinking. In the reading of God’s word, he seems to disregard even the most naturally occurring thought and reason leaving room only for his strict brand of literalism. Human
reason was to be discouraged from interfering with the pure reception of divine word. According to Khatib al-Baghdadi, Dāwūd was the Ḩāmān ahl al-zāhir and the first to hold onto the zāhir (apparent) meanings and reject qiyyās (analogical reasoning). Ibn al-Jawzi, probably seeking to explain what the term zāhir means, describes Dāwūd’s madhhab as “rigid” because it stops at the texts (al-naqf), disregards what could be understood from them (al-mafhum), and focuses only on their wording. The zāhirīs were notorious for their view that the higher wisdom and purpose (al-maqāsid) of Shari‘a were unknowable and thus irrelevant to the actual application of the law. They regarded as arbitrary and baseless the opposite view that God’s intentions, wisdom, and purpose were knowable. Moreover, al-Qādī al-Nu‘mān attributes to Dāwūd’s son (Muhammad ibn Dāwūd) an uncompromising rejection of the notion that the ‘īlāh (rationale) for a ruling could be discovered, and this is a recurrent theme in the writings of the famous zāhirī scholar Ibn Hazm. Many scholars identify this particular stance as the defining feature of Zahirism.

Some background will help with understanding terms such as ahl al-hadith and ahl al-ra‘y that are used in this section (but see Appendix 2 for a detailed treatment). Islam’s primary sources of law are the Quran and Sunna (normative precedents established in the spirit of the Prophet). One of the sources of the Sunna is the hadith (a record of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet and his Companions). Another source of Sunna is the living tradition (‘amāl) of those who followed the Prophet and acted in the spirit of his teachings. As it happened, many of those who collected hadith began to see them as the second source of Islamic law after the Quran. Their view on this matter was incorrect because it is rather the Sunna (precedents in the Prophetic spirit) that is the second source of law and the hadith is merely one of the sources of the Sunna. These folks known as the ahl al-hadith (people of hadith) were replacing the Sunna with one of its sources, namely, hadith. They were equating historical reports of Prophetic and Companion traditions (hadith) with the rulings of fiqh even though, properly speaking, fiqh judgments must be based on other sources as well such as ‘amāl and ra‘y (discretionary opinion). The ahl al-ra‘y (people of discretionary or considered opinion) were opposed to this narrowing of the sources of fiqh and continued to maintain that discretionary or considered opinion had to be applied to the various sources in order to arrive at genuine fiqh rulings.

Returning to the discussion, Dāwūd was born in either Kufa or Kashaan (Iran), and some of his early teachers belonged to Basra and were of the ahl al-hadith. This suggests that he spent some of his earlier life in that city before finally settling in Baghdad. While his early (mostly Basran) teachers were of the ahl al-hadith, later in Baghdad one of his main teachers, Abū Thawr al-Kalbī (d. 240/854), was initially from the ahl al-ra‘y. Abū Thawr finally adopted the Shāfi‘i madhhab after meeting the eponym of that school. Biographical records indicate that Abū Thawr was more inclined to jurisprudence than hadith transmission. But the fact that Abū Thawr embraced the Shāfi‘i madhhab probably goes a long way in explaining why the Quran and Prophetic hadith became the primary textual sources for Dāwūd and his zāhirī madhhab. The reason is that al-Shāfi‘i adopted a view of jurisprudence that essentially narrowed down the sources of fiqh primarily to the Quran and Prophetic hadith (although unlike Dāwūd’s final view, al-Shāfi‘i allowed for a limited use of qiyyās as well). Dāwūd al-Zāhirī, as he became known, had students (called the zāhirīs) but they were not well-known until almost two centuries later when an Andalusian zāhirī scholar by the name of Ibn Hazm gained recognition. Ibn Hazm regarded Dāwūd as the master of the madhhab, and he believed himself to be
connected to Dāwūd through Andalusian scholars who had studied with the master himself. Dāwūd’s views found their way to al-Andalus soon after his death, and a number of Dāwūdī scholars continued to travel between al-Andalus and the Muslim East until Ibn Hazm’s time. For these reasons, Ibn Hazm’s views on Zahirism could be considered truly representative of Dāwūd except where he differed with the master.

Textualist Literalism

In the classical system of Islamic fiqh, after the Quran and Sunna, qiyās (analogical reasoning) is usually seen as the third source of law. But Dāwūd was a textual literalist whose entire theory seems to be based on the idea that human beings are not in a position to give any interpretation to the literal words of God and the Prophet as embalmed in the Quran and books of Prophetic hadith. God and the Prophet have chosen the best possible words for conveying their intentions, and as the Quran and recorded Prophetic hadith have captured and preserved these words they must be the ultimate sources of fiqh. No other sources can be given precedence over them. This view has something in common with the literalism proposed in Section 5, namely that epistemic limits severely restrict our ability to give meaning to God’s words. However, the literalism of Section 5 does not aim to quell human reasoning and would allow the perception of a sufficient reason to overrule a literal reading of the Quran. Moreover, Section 5 in no way gives precedence to Prophetic hadith over other sources of law because (as discussed in Appendix 2) sources such as ‘amāl and ra’y are often a truer reflection of divine and Prophetic intent. However, the emphasis in Section 5 on the mediating community (early Muslims) as the primary context in which the meanings of the Quran (and Sunna) are embedded is a mirror of the zāhirī method of seeking the meaning of words in the way the Arabs understood them at the time of revelation.

Given its textual literalism, it seems that the zāhirī madhab was forced into a profoundly unwise rejection of qiyās (reasoning by analogy). Because qiyās is a ubiquitous and indispensible method for applying limited textual resources to the unlimited situations of life, its rejection could be seen as one of the main reasons that the zāhirī madhab did not survive. It is not only the ahl al-ra’y such as Abu Hanifa and his students that made extensive use of qiyās, but even jurists who were much closer to the zāhirī view such as al-Shāfi‘ī saw it as an indispensible legal method. Not only this, even Dāwūd’s great ahl al‐hadith contemporaries such as Ibn Hanbal used it in sadd al-dhara‘i, that is, the prohibiting of something on the ground that it may lead to something that is wrong and forbidden. But it would seem that accepting qiyās would have undermined Dāwūd’s whole theory because reason would then be free to expand on the literal meaning of the texts.

Closely linked to the rejection of qiyās is the rejection of the ‘illā or rationale for Shari‘i rulings. Dāwūd does not allow that human reason can reliably arrive at knowledge of God’s reasons for promulgating a given rule. As we cannot grasp the divine rationale (‘illā) for the rules it is also not possible for us to reason by analogy (qiyās) in order to apply those rules to analogous cases. After all, one can only construct an analogy to a new case if one grasps the ‘illā in the original case. For example, it is only if we see the ‘illā for the ban on khamr (an alcoholic beverage) as aimed at preventing the intoxication of the mind that we can construct an analogy with drugs because they also intoxicate the mind. So it is basically Dāwūd’s positing of
epistemic limits in order to explain our inability to discover the ‘īllā of a ruling that leads him also to reject qiyās.

Recent textualism also reflects the zāhirī doctrine. The conservative American jurist, Antonin Scalia⁹, was the longest serving Justice of the Supreme Court after being appointed by Ronald Reagan in 1986. As a textualist, he looked at the American constitution in a way that is quite similar to Ibn Hazm’s explanation of the zāhirī doctrine. Justice Scalia believed that legislation as made in the constitution is the real law and the jurist only has the authority to implement it. The jurist does not make the laws but merely implements them. It is not his duty to amend them by trying to understand the intention behind them but he must simply focus on the words as passed by Congress without giving them independent meaning. Ibn Hazm’s view is similar to this because he believed that the laws are made by God and a faqih cannot make or amend the laws but must only implement them. The laws are to be implemented as they appear in Quran and as explained by the Prophet because it is God and the Prophet that have the authority to give law. The faqih cannot discover the higher wisdom or rationale behind a ruling in order to pass a context based judgment. With no ‘īllā in hand, he cannot engage in qiyās in matters where neither the book of God nor the Prophet explained the rationale behind a ruling.

As detailed in Appendix 2, the fiqh culture of the first Islamic century was the furthest thing from zāhirī textualism. The second Caliph, ‘Umar bin al-Khattāb, set many rational precedents in this regard. While he followed the primary sources of Quran and Sunna, he followed them in spirit always being perceptive and sensitive to sufficient reasons for not applying the texts in a literal manner. For example, he was willing to accept zakāt on horses even though the Prophet had said that there would be no zakāt on horses. Of course, the Prophet had probably meant, but not literally said, that there will be no zakāt on horses that are bred for war. When Muslims began to breed horses for business purposes, ‘Umar did the logical thing by reopening the discussion on the issue. Having been at the Prophet’s side for decades, ‘Umar had a good sense of the ‘īllā for Prophetic rulings, and so he could easily find ways of fulfilling that ‘īllā through new rules. In the same way, he declared the conquered territories of Iraq and Egypt to be state lands because it would have defeated the higher Islamic purposes of socio-economic justice and progress if he had blindly followed the Prophetic practice of distributing war booty among the soldiery. The Prophet had distributed booty from his minor desert conquests to give incentive to his fighters, but ‘Umar saw the conquest of vast territories as a critically different context that gave him sufficient reason not to divide the conquered lands among the soldiery. Similarly, ‘Umar had the common sense to withhold the hadd (final) punishment of cutting off hands for theft in situations of serious food scarcity. Reason and common sense were always active in discovering the higher wisdom of divine and Prophetic commandments. But Dāwūd’s voiding of ‘īllā (rationale) and qiyās (analogy based on rationale) in the presence of literal text because of a human inability to judge the bātin (underlying) meaning of the text represents an especially austere form of literalism that has little in common with the fiqh methodology of the first Islamic century. The zāhir (apparent) meaning of the text had precedence over the actions and interpretations of the Prophet’s closest Companions including Abu Bakr and ‘Umar who had spent their lives with the Prophet and had a deep understanding of his motivations and aspirations. For Dāwūd, the ‘amāl or living tradition of the Companions are merely recommended and not binding in the way of the Quran and hadīth. Thus, his view on ‘amal was at loggerheads with Imam Malik and the Maliki madhhab and only to a slightly
lesser extent with Abu Hanifa and the Hanafi madhab. Dāwūd’s rejection of ‘amal is part of the same stream as the rejection of ‘illā and qiyās. The verses of the Quran and the Prophetic hadith were the very words of God and the Prophet (who was under direct divine guidance) but the ‘amāl were acts of ordinary people who were not necessarily under divine guidance and who could have erred in their interpretation of God and the Prophet. For this reason, the ‘amāl can never have the status of the very words of God and the Prophet. Even when a Companion describes what the Prophet used to do he is offering a narrative account that is not in the words of the Prophet. The narrator is using his own words to describe an event and not the actual words of God or the Prophet who are the real authority. So the opinions of Companions and Successors were not really authoritative sources for the zāhirīs.

Some Cases
Quran 4:43 specifies conditions that make it obligatory to perform tyammum (ritual purification using clean sand or mud) when there is no clean water available. One of the conditions is lāmastum nisā‘ and this literally means touching a woman. This gives rise to a debate on whether touching a woman makes it mandatory to perform the ritual ablution before prayer. Some Companions are reported to have opined that mere touching is sufficient to mandate ablution while others maintained that it is only touching with sexual intent (or, in the case of tyammum, it is the act of sexual intercourse that requires performance of the ritual). The Companion Abdullah ibn Abbas believed that lāmastum means intercourse. Of course he didn’t mean that the word lāmastum always means intercourse but rather that God intended for us to take this meaning here even though its literal meaning is touching. An opinion attributed to Abdullah ibn Masood was that it meant mere touching and not intercourse. This debate is similar to an incident at the Prophet’s time regarding a journey to the Banū Quraiza where two groups understood the same command differently, one in a literalist manner while the other sought a deeper intended meaning. But returning to the point, there was some disagreement about the reading of the word lamasa. Ibn Masood used to read it as lamastum (لمسة) and not lāmastum (لماست) and in the first case it does mean mere touching but in the latter case it could mean both touching and intercourse. An additional debate is whether kissing a wife will also be considered lāmastum, and there is no direct report attributed to the Prophet where he explained or commented on these issues. Ibn Masood and Ibn ‘Umar took the literalist view and decided that mere touching and kissing makes the ritual ablution compulsory while Ibn Abbas held that God intended to mention intercourse here but did not use the word mubahira because of considerations of modesty and decency. For Ibn Abbas, lāmastum did not include kissing but simply alluded to intercourse. Later scholars such as Abu Hanifa, Ibn Hanbal, and Dāwūd all came to different conclusions. Abu Hanifa believed that lāmastum means touching with intent or with desire and that view was attributed to his teachers Hammad and al-Nakhai. However, Abu Hanifa did not consider mere intent to be substantial reason for invalidating ritual purity but suggested that the complete reason was that a man lies naked with his wife, skin on skin, and experiences erection, and it is only then that he must repeat his ritual ablution. On the other hand, in contrast to Abu Hanifa, Dāwūd, regarding the Quran and Prophetic Sunna as epistemologically equal textual sources, believed that the verb in the verse meant the mere and (apparently) unconditional touching of women. He probably did not see why it should be understood otherwise. It is certain that the root l-m-s means touching, and even if it is assumed that the
use of the third form of the verb possibly suggests something else, a mere possibility does not 
ACHINE a valid reason for abandoning what we are certain of. So here Dāwūd’s Zāhirīṣm is 
evident as he is taking the basic meaning of ĩ-m-s which is mere touching and he feels no 
compulsion to consider what else it could mean. Thus, for Dāwūd any sort of touching will 
cause the ritual impurity although, according to Ibn Hazm, Dāwūd did mean that this touching 
includes intent of touching and so an unwitting touch does not nullify ritual purity. But if the 
touch is deliberate, regardless of any other factor, the ritual purity is void.

We see that Dāwūd’s method revolves strictly around the text. If he finds contradictory reports 
in the hadīth or opinions of the Companions he tones them down by commenting on their 
isnād (chains of narration) or claiming that such contradictory traditions are from a time when 
the Quranic verse on the issue had not yet been revealed. The problem with this approach is 
that Dāwūd sidelines the views of the Companions that must surely count as evidence of the 
divine and Prophetic intent. Regardless of whether God and the Prophet explicitly stated their 
intent, the actions and opinions of the Companions or the nature of the surrounding 
circumstances or arguments often reveal this intent. But in order to uphold his textualism, 
Dāwūd sidelines evidence which is not directly quoted from the Quran and hadīth.

Another interesting case is that of imra’at al-Mafqūd, that is, the case of a married woman 
whose husband went missing or disappeared. Dāwūd’s view is that until it is confirmed that 
her husband is dead she will remain his wife but it is reported that ‘Umar bin Khattāb had once 
given permission to a woman to marry another man after telling her to wait for four years and 
then complete an additional four month period (as a widow is obliged to do after the death of 
her husband). Dāwūd did not accept this decision of the second Caliph on the basis that there 
is no textual evidence for it. 99 Abu Hanifa shared Dāwūd’s position but for different reasons 
while Ibn Hanbal was in accord with the second Caliph on the basis of the fact that it is 
necessary for women to live a normal married life as there is no celibacy in Islam. 100 Ibn Hanbal 
based his position on the Companions’ opinions and the basic idea of discouraging celibacy. 
Although Abu Hanifa and Dāwūd come to almost the same conclusion the method that they 
use is completely different. Abu Hanifa’s decision is not based on lack of textual evidence but 
rather on the reasoning that the woman ought not to be considered a widow if her husband is 
merely absent or missing. Because there is every possibility that he may return, her continuing 
status as his wife may avoid legal complications if he does return. Abu Hanifa may also have 
relied on the fourth Caliph’s decision whereby he did not approve this law and considered it 
void. But as expected, Dāwūd does not seem concerned with the husband’s return or the 
fourth Caliph’s views but rather rejects the second Caliph’s decision for the simple reason that 
there was no textual evidence for it.

In the case of talaq al-sakraan (divorce in a state of drunkenness), again the question regards 
the marital status of a woman but this time one whose husband divorces her while he is drunk. 
Dāwūd declared such a divorce invalid not using Companions’ opinion which were available 
but on the basis of Quranic text (4:43) where he wants to maintain that a drunken man is not 
in his right mind and cannot know what he is saying. 101 While not explicitly stating it, and 
against his own zāhirī madhhab, Ibn Hazm uses qiyyās in this case because he also uses verse 
4:43 that has to do with prayer and drunkenness rather than divorce and drunkenness. Abu 
Hanifa declared such a divorce valid and did not use analogy in this case as other scholars did. 
He could easily have relied on the spirit of the law by thinking along the lines that a man
cannot be taken seriously when he is not in his right mind. But surprisingly and perhaps uncharacteristically he allows such a divorce.\textsuperscript{102}

The hermeneutical position advanced in this thesis could be labeled rational literalism and is in stark contrast to the text-bound literalism of the \textit{zāhirī madhab} discussed in this section. However, the discussions of chapters 2 and 3 that follow will take us far afield away from any form of literalism whatsoever to an exploration of liberalism, humanism, and utilitarianism. The error of the liberal-minded authors that advance these positions is the opposite of the error made by text-bound or tradition-bound literalists. Rigid textualists/traditionalists fail to abandon literal understandings even when there is sufficient reason to. By contrast, liberal-minded authors abandon literal understandings even when there is \textit{no} sufficient reason to. The literalist solution outlined in Section 5 above and elaborated in Chapter 4 is basically one that abandons literalist understandings \textit{only} when there is sufficient reason to do so.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Oppy, Graham R. \textit{Arguing About Gods}. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 100-2. Avicenna’s argument for a necessary being is close to this and along with the \textit{kalam} cosmological argument is a good argument for the existence of a perfect being. I thank my supervisor, Sajjad Rizvi, for pointing this out to me.
\item This goes back to Aristotle’s argument in the \textit{Physics} on the First Mover and to Philo of Alexandria’s agreement. I thank Rizvi for pointing this out to me. See Aristotle, \textit{Physics} (Oxford World Classics), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. lx – lxx; and also Sorabji, Richard. \textit{Time, Creation and the Continuum}, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1984
\item It seems to be a logical possibility precisely because of our epistemic limits, that is, because we cannot know enough about it. So it is not so much that it is a logical possibility but rather that there is an epistemic limit to knowing whether or not the case before us is one of logical possibility.
\item See endnote 3.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 23
\item See Oppy, \textit{Arguing About Gods}, p. 231
\item \textit{Ibid.}, p. 234
\item \textit{Ibid}
\item As the Aristotelian tradition makes clear, infinite universes do not obviate the need for the One. I thank Rizvi for pointing this out to me.
\item Oppy, \textit{Arguing About Gods}, pp. 236-9
\item See Appendix 3.
\item ‘Mark Wynn (1993) has argued that an infinite designer hypothesis is simpler, but that a finite designer hypothesis is more likely because there is only one way to possess every power, or to know everything, but there is no limit to the number of ways in which an agent may fall short of this. Similarly, Wynn argues that in terms of power, \textit{a priori} the more complex hypothesis is more likely (one or another finite designer), because there is only one way to have infinite power, but an innumerable number of ways of having finite power’ (Don Fawkes and Tom Smythe, “Simplicity and Theology”, \textit{Religious Studies}, Vol. 32, No. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 260-1).
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 153-4
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
See Appendix 3 for an account of the relation of God to energy, space and time and Appendix 4 for an attempted construction of a thinking being (such as God) purely from an indivisible unit of energy.


Ibid.


Ibid., p. 110

Ibid., pp. 111-2

Ibid


Ibid. p. 299

Ibid, pp. 299-300. Hirsch: ‘From very early times the idea of interpretation has combined and to some extent confused two functions, the understanding of meaning and the explication of meaning. One of the earliest distinctions in hermeneutics discriminated between these two functions: the ars intelligendi, the art of understanding, and the ars explicandi, the art of explaining. Obviously, an interpreter must first construe or understand a meaning before he explains it to others. Nevertheless, it is useful to stick to the broad term “interpretation,” which fuses the two functions, since they do go together whenever any representation is explicated. To focus on the prior activity, one can simply use the term “understanding.”’


Ibid


Jasper, Short Introduction, p. 96.


Jasper, Short Introduction, pp. 62-3, 70-7


Ibid, pp. 74-5.

Thistleton, Hermeneutics, pp. 23-4.

Ibid, p. 8

Ibid, p. 50

Ibid, p. 24


Ibid., pp. 90-1


Ibid.

Ibid.

My interest in interpreting the texts of Islam is as a believer seeking to apply Islamic principles to my life. While non-believers may interpret the Quran they will not do so with the motivation of living their lives by it. They may do so with the motivation of suggesting to us ways of living our lives by it, but then again their suggestions would be something we believers would have to take into consideration. Islam enters the world (in practice) through believers’ interpretations and actions. So it is really believers’
interpretations, or at least the acceptance by believers of an interpretation, that obviously matters. It is the believers’ interpretation of Islam that has any practical significance, and this is the interpretation that I seek. In this thesis as a whole, I am searching for the interpretation of the texts of Islam by a rational believer.

56 Trust is preserved through a chain of trustworthy personalities. I have deaf-blind trust only in Allah. This deaf-blind trust is the anchor for all faith related beliefs that I may subsequently form. I choose to trust Allah. I thus trust His words. I thus trust the Prophet that He trusted to be messenger and role model. So the Prophet is in my universe of trust, and he is there because of the following chain of trust: I trust Allah and Allah trusts the Prophet. Again, my trust in Allah is the anchor for the chain. I have said that I entered Islam only on the basis of trust in Allah. So if anyone else enters my universe of trust it is because Allah trusts that person, and this is why the Prophet is in this universe. Allah is the only being with the metaphysical credentials necessary to bring others into my universe of trust. Only He knows who else can be trusted with the responsibility of offering metaphysical guidance. Besides the Prophet, is there anyone else in this universe? If the historical record shows that Allah trusted some of the Companions of the Prophet, then those Companions are in the universe of persons I trust in matters of faith. What kind of evidence would there be of Allah’s trust in a Companion? This evidence may be found in Allah’s words in the Quran, for example, when it announces the higher spiritual attainment of the Prophet’s wives. Or this evidence may be in Allah’s communication through the Prophet of trust in some persons (for example, the Prophet gave some Companions the glad tidings of paradise). Or it may be in the fact that the Prophet trusted some persons and the Prophet’s trust reflects Allah’s trust in them (for example, Zayd b. Thabit, Abdullah b. Abbas, Anas b. Malik). Thus, some of the early Muslims will enter my universe of trust because they are declared trustworthy by the Quran or the Prophet. Can Successors to the Companions (that is, the generation following the Companions) enter this universe? Well, if historical analysis allows me to establish that Allah trusted a particular Companion and that this Companion trusted one of the Successors, then the Successor may enter my universe of trust. In a nutshell, what I am saying is that because of the way that I arrive at faith (through deaf-blind trust in Allah) it would simply be irrational of me (in matters of faith) to trust anyone whom the historical record does not show is trusted by Allah. A religious psychology such as this highlights the critical importance of the mediating community (see previous section) in arriving at the authorial intent of the Quran. Only members of the mediating community are geo-historically placed to reflect the meaning of God’s words while modern interpreters such as Rahman need a wondrous item such as the universal moral law to get close to God’s thoughts.

But returning to trust, in order to understand why it is so difficult to enter my universe of trust, it may help to imagine that you are a person who is born deaf and blind, and who may learn to trust your childhood caregiver and guide, but in later years may only be able to trust the people that your guide trusts. As such a person, you may incur a tremendous cost for trusting someone outside your circle of trust. Even simply going for a walk with a casual acquaintance would be worrisome because in the case of an accident, for example, this person may abandon you. So when you are deaf and blind it pays to be ultra-careful in choosing whom you trust. This extreme caution is the natural and rational human posture in matters pertaining to metaphysical reality. In this is a lesson for all would be interpreters of the Quran. Rational believers will be extremely wary of any interpretation of Allah’s words by anyone other than the Prophet, and maybe some of his Companions and the very early generations of Muslims. And they will be extremely wary of anyone asking them to go along with any assumptions in the interpretation of these words.

57 Trust is not the only motivation for rational faith. Other important motivations are the urge to know and a longing for inner peace.

58 To be reminded of one reason for such trust, aesthetically, trust in God is an unparalleled emotion.

59 Quoted in Jasper, Short Introduction, p. 51.


61 John Wansbrough offers a very remote third possibility that I will not consider, viz., that the Quran was not introduced to the world by Muhammad but came to be written much later.

62 See Reynolds, Gabriel Said. The Quran in its Historical Context, London: Routledge, 2008. The first possibility is that Muhammad had the Quran from some worldly source(s). There is no evidence that this worldly source was Muhammad himself, in other words, that the Quran was a radically original work of his. This is because the only evidence that would probably work is a self-confession and we do not have one. Nor is there sufficient evidence for historians such as Christoph Luxenberg and Günter Lüling to be able to demonstrate that the Quran was derived from other worldly sources (Syriac, Aramaic, Christian). While the evidence actually presented in this scholarly tradition is invariably scant, as I have said I am
here only concerned to make the weaker claim that it is not sufficient. The second possibility is that the Quran was corrupted after it was introduced by Muhammad. Again, the evidence for this is scant but I need only make the weaker claim that it is not sufficient. A common sense historical argument actually makes the second possibility quite remote. Both common sense and historical evidence suggest that the Companions of the Prophet were religiously motivated individuals and that after his death they were heavily preoccupied with the preservation of God’s word. Keep in mind that they were also a highly capable ruling class of a growing empire. As they were both capable and in power, and as they were also preoccupied with the Quran’s preservation, I would imagine that they would most likely have succeeded in the task of preservation. In any event, there is no sufficient reason to believe that they did not. See Al-Azami, Muhammad Mustafa. The History of the Quranic Text, Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003.

63 What do I mean by traditional Islam? Well, firstly, the concept “traditional Islam” is a heuristic device that roughly captures a useful idea. It may be easiest to understand this idea in contrast to others. We may usefully contrast traditional to customary, the latter word describing the Islam of different regions colored by local customs (see Kurzman, Charles. Liberal Islam, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 5). While the Muslims following local customs (customary Islam) are obviously traditional, I think it is useful to think of traditional Islam rather as a non-local phenomenon, as something that is shared throughout the Islamic world. For example, the view that there is a God who sent an angel to Muhammad is shared across the Islamic world and is the traditional view. Traditional Muslims believe that the Quran is God’s literal word. As these views are literally expressed in the Quran, we can immediately see a deep link between traditional Islam and literalism. Traditional Islam also possesses a canon of hadith material that is seen as the second source of fiqh after the Quran. For example, the Sunnis have six (Sihah Sitta) canonical collections. Shi‘is have four collections of their own although they are not considered canonical in the same way. Here again, the deep link between traditional Islam and literalism is evident because the hadith collections (and their authority) are the product of a literalist turn in Islamic culture in the latter half of the 8th century A.D. Importantly, for my purposes, traditional Islam is characterized by taqlid (imitation) rather than ijtihad (rational inquiry). This means that because of the way past individuals are accepted as spiritual, moral, and legal authorities, any freedom of thought is basically allowed only within the confines of the precedents they set. For example, Sunni legal reasoning is bound by the four sources of law: Quran, hadith, qiyās (early precedents of analogical reasoning), and ijmā (scholarly consensus). In a nutshell, my use of ‘traditional’ here is ‘in the general, social scientific sense to denote taqlid, i.e. dominant, conventional, and established.’ (see Nafi, Basheer M., “The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam”, in Nafi and Taji-Farouki (eds.), Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004, p. 29).

Another useful contrast is that of traditional and revivalist Islam. Revivalist Islam emerged as a reaction first to the waywardness of customary Islam and then to the oppression of European colonialism (Wahhabism is the proto-typical revivalist movement). Revivalism sought to purge Islam of all contaminants, local or foreign. This may explain some of its bipolar thinking evidenced in categories such as ‘Islam and jahiliyya, dar al-Islam and dar al-harb, or Islam and kufr’ (Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 14). Revivalism has tended to burden concepts such as kufr and jihad with far more weight than these concepts can bear. In contrast to traditional Islam, revivalism focuses on the acquisition of worldly power because power is necessary for the practical task of purifying Islam and its lands. For this reason, it embraces Western science and technology and competes for power in Western style political systems. In order to forge strong communal identity and unity, it gives undue weight to ritualistic observances and conservative norms. Thus, while revivalist Islam holds on passionately to literalism as an interpretive strategy its passion also often blinds it so that it cannot discern holistic meanings beyond the letter of law or Scripture. Given its impatience, pragmatism, and thirst for power, revivalism blazed a path through centuries of dusty accumulated (traditional) knowledge and claimed that its worldly actions had to be justified only in the light of Islam’s primal sources (Quran and Sunna). God’s word and His Prophet is all the authority and inspiration we need and there is no need for traditional intermediaries or wisdom.

A final useful contrast is that of traditional and modernist Islam. Islamic modernism shares the impatience and pragmatism of revivalism but its aim is different, namely, to see the Islamic world adopt successful Western practices as the means to social and material progress. Modernism embraces Western knowledge in a deeper and more holistic manner, eager to adopt Western practice in the humanities and social sciences as well as the natural sciences. This clearly sets modernism apart from both traditional and revivalist Islam. However, in order to achieve their end of social and material progress through the adoption of Western practices, modernists are often willing to remove any obstacle in their path whether it is (like the revivalists) the centuries of intervening Islamic tradition or
(unlike the revivalists) the interpretive strategy of literalism. Muhammad ‘Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan were early modernists who offered non-literal interpretations of the Quran that were seen to be in harmony with Enlightenment rationalism. Two of the modernists that I consider later in this thesis (Soroush and Rahman) are clearly influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and lean towards a (quasi) naturalistic view of the origins of Islam.

64 ‘[The] late Muslim response to challenges imposed by the Western powers reflected the fact that it was primarily in the battlefields, rather than in fields of law, education and architecture, that Muslims first experienced the rising power of modern Europe... Soon, however, it became apparent that Western challenges were more fundamental and that even the attaining of modern military capabilities required wide-ranging social, economic and even political reorganizations. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of the First World War, almost all parts of the Muslim world were touched by this process, which amounted to a remoulding of Islamic societies in a modern European cast.’ (Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 36)

65 Taji-Farouki, Suha and Nafi, Basheer M., “Introduction”, in Islamic Thought, pp. 5-7, 10-1

66 Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 42-4

67 ‘Since the ground had already been prepared by the grand figures of the eighteenth century, almost all agreed on the primacy of the original Islamic texts, the urgent need for renewing the moral fabric of society and a new era of ijtihād.’ (Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 30-5)

68 Kurzman, Charles, Liberal Islam, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 6-7. Shah Waliullah was primarily a Sufi shaykh and should not be thought of solely as a revivalist. I thank Rizvi for pointing this out to me.


70 I should say more about the socio-political context in which we are discussing modernist interpretive strategies. One of the legacies of European colonialism imprint on the Muslim mind was the idea that the nation-state is the surest vehicle for the control and progress of land and people (Europe herself was divided into nation-states). ‘The monopolization of violence by the state, in the form of modern armies, police force and security systems, as well as hierarchically accountable, impersonal administration... the imposition of central rule over locally run and semi-autonomous regions’, the construction of roads, railway lines and telegraphic networks, the introduction of land reforms and the dissemination of modern education of a uniform curriculum, all contributed to the creation and control of a homogenous nation (see Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 37). Both revivalists and modernists embraced the idea of the nation-state but the logic of nation-state required modern legal systems. Traditional Muslim systems were seen as inefficient, non-uniform, and at least redundant. Attempts to codify the Shari‘a were short-lived and European civil and public laws had to be ‘imported wholesale’ (Nafi, Islamic Thought, p. 37). The religious and un-codified Shari‘a was consigned mostly to matters of personal law (see Hallaq, Wael B., Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 21).

Even within such a restricted domain, it was challenged by successful Western practices such as debt financing, gender equality, and human rights. Western values of socioeconomic justice, egalitarianism, and universal freedom frowned upon literal interpretations of the Quran that prohibited interest banking, gave men double share in inheritance, and allowed polygamy and even slavery.

Thus, while the nation-state represented the new world order, its efficient working was at odds with the implementation of an Islamic law that had flourished for centuries in traditional societies. It was far more practical to import European institutions and legal systems for the functioning of the state, and this was reflected in modern courts, law schools, civil bureaucracy, governance structures, and so on (see Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 547). In order to re-introduce the Islamic law into this new order a basic and extensive re-interpretation of the sources of law was necessary. Such a project began to gather momentum in the 20th century, and it is in the context of this project that we are discussing the modernist interpretive strategies of utilitarianism, liberalism, and humanism.

71 ‘Abduh, Muhammad, Kitab al-tawhid, Maktab Shamela, pp. 25, 27, 29, 62. Reason can explore the universe in order to arrive at truth. Reason can operate independently to recognize truth (p. 25). The truth is the existence of Allah and reason can lead us to a recognition of His existence and attributes (p. 62). However, reason cannot explore the nature of God and the manner of His existence (p. 27). For this it is dependent on revelation. See also Mark Sedgwick, Muhammad Abduh, Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2010, p. 65: ‘Risalat al-tawhid starts somewhat philosophically... Muhammad Abduh deduces the existence of God from the need for a prior cause, and argues that God can be known rationally. Reason cannot penetrate the divine essence, however, which is one reason for revealed religion.’ Sedgwick notes that in Abduh’s naturalistic, non-miraculous rationalism the angels are “natural
forces” and the seven heavens are the seven planets and so on (pp. 86-7). Thus it is clear that Abduh applies a narrow scientific rationalism to Quranic interpretation. See also Hallaq, History, pp. 212, 214; Hallaq, Shari’a, p. 503-4.

72 Masud, Muhammad Khalid. Shāṭī’ī’s Philosophy of Islamic Law. (New Delhi: KitabBhavan, 1997), p. 130, 163.

73 Hallaq, Shari’a, p. 504-8.

74 Rida, Rashid, al-Ribawa-i Muamalaat fi-I Islam, Al-Zahir: Maktaba al-saqafat al-diniya, 1421/2001, p. 56. Other authors, such as ‘Ashmawi, who could be said to think along similar utilitarian lines, have also spelled out possibilities such as the obsolescence of the prohibition on bank interest (Hallaq, Shari’a, p. 525-6). Kerr observes that the theological foundations of Islamic law may have inhibited Rida from spelling out some of the implications of his view. This is because theological foundations minimize the role of reason in legal theory (Masud, Shāṭī’ī’s Philosophy, p. 133).


76 ‘Abduh, Kitab al-Tawheed, p. 29. See also Hallaq, Shari’a, p. 503-4: “Abduh’s contribution lay not in proposing a new legal theory, but rather in crafting a theology that instigated a relative break from the pre-modern Ash’arite conception of causality and rationality. A chief postulate of this theology, considerably influenced by Mu’tazilite thought (and no doubt reflecting an indirect Kantian influence), was that sound human reason is, on its own, capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. If there appears to be a contradiction between reason and revelation concerning any particular issue, it is because one or the other has been misunderstood. This doctrine (otherwise known as dar’ ta’arud al-‘aql wal-naqil) received full support in mainstream theological and juristic circles, but ‘Abduh gave it a heavier Mu’tazilite twist in maintaining that reason is not simply a partner of revelation but can in effect displace it as a guide to human action. Yet, while the determination of the value of an act is the province of reason, the penalty or reward that results from the commission or omission of the act is the jurisdiction of revelation. Thus, the use of reason is maximized, yet the religious tenor is not set aside. But the balance stands clearly in favor of an unprecedentedly favorable approach to materialism, whereby Muslims are called upon not to concern themselves overly with the hereafter to the detriment of their worldly life, since the best way to live as a Muslim is to pursue material progress (Kerr, Islamic Reform, pp. 103-86). With this theology, ‘Abduh provided a break with pre-modern theological and juristic conceptions, paving the way for the subsequent emergence of a wide variety of theories that came to express positions ranging from the religious to the secular.’ See also Hallaq, History, p. 212. See also Sedgwick, Muhammad Abduh, p. 65: ‘Moving from philosophy to sociology, Muhammad Abduh argues that although humans – who have free will - could in theory act rationally, judging the value of acts on the basis of their consequences, in practice they often act foolishly or ignorantly, once again giving rise to a need for revealed religion to guide them’ (italics added).

77 This strategy is carefully evaluated in Chapter 2. While Oxford and philosophy had their impact on Rahman, the Mu’tazila and falasifa were probably the more crucial influences on him. I thank Rizvi for pointing this out to me.

78 Hallaq, Shari’a, pp. 509, 517, 519, 530.

79 Ibid p. 512

80 I am indebted to the research of my colleague Omar Raza for most of the material in this section.

81 Amr Osman, The History and Doctrine of the Zahiri Madhhah , PhD dissertation, Princeton, June 2010, p. 20

82 Ibn Jawzī, Muntazm, vol. 12, p. 236 as cited in Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, p. 20

83 Al-Qāzī al-Nu’mān (d.363/974) discusses the methodology of zahirism in his book Ikhtilāf Usūl al-Madhhāhib.

84 Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, pp. 23-40

85 Ibid, pp. 10-11

86 Ibid, pp. 27-28

87 See the discussion on al-Shafi’i in Appendix 2.

88 Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, p. 96

89 For a discussion on textualism and literalism and why zāhirīs are more textualist than literalist see Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, pp. 226 -277

90 Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, p. 153

91 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonin_Scala. Osman, Zahiri Madhhah, Ch. 4 discusses the textualism of Antonin Scalia who was an American jurist who served as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. As the longest-serving justice on the Court, Scalia was the Senior Associate Justice.
Appointed to the Court by President Ronald Reagan in 1986, Scalia was described as the intellectual anchor of the Court’s conservative wing.

92 Tabari, Tafseer, Vol. 8, p. 389, Maktab Shamela
93 Osman, Zahiri Madhhab, p. 1: ‘It is reported that when the Prophet Muhammad decided to fight the Jewish tribe of the Banū Qurayza, he said to his Companions: “Do not pray the afternoon (‘asr) prayer except in the abode of the Banū Qurayza.” The Prophet’s Companions understood this command variously. One group of them took it to mean that they should pray the afternoon prayer only when they reached the Banū Qurayza, even if this meant praying it after its prescribed time. Another group inferred that what the Prophet actually meant was that they should not waste any time in preparing for and setting off to the battlefield. According to this latter understanding, the Companions were being requested to hurry, but they were nonetheless supposed to pray the afternoon prayer at its due time. The Prophet, it is reported, was silent on the matter. He did not reprimand either group, nor did he endorse one understanding over the other’.
95 Tabari, Tafseer, Vol. 8, p. 393
96 Ibid, Vol. 8, p. 391
97 Sarkhasi, Kitab ul Mabsoot, Vol. 1, p. 192, Maktab Shamela
98 Osman, Zahiri Madhhab, p. 318
99 Ibid, p. 341
Chapter 2
The Liberalism of Fazlur Rahman

Liberal authors seek freedom from tradition and literalism in order to prepare the hermeneutical ground for the adoption of successful modern practices into Islam. In this vein, Rahman attempts to create a space for himself to re-interpret the texts of Islam in opposition to tradition and literalism and in a way that is compatible with successful and Western practices of modernity. As a result, I am inclined to think of him as a liberal and a modernist (see Chapter 1, endnote 63). My overall argument in this chapter will be that liberal discourse basically suffers from an inability to clearly grasp the order of conceptual priority in the Quran. We find liberals giving unwarranted importance to subjects such as ethics, egalitarianism, and religious pluralism. While it is beyond question that such subjects are important for the Quran, it is of far greater importance to find their place in the order of things because of what this means for interpretation.

1. Rahman on Revelation

The traditional literalist view of revelation is that God gave the archangel Gabriel the mission of conveying the verses of the Quran to Muhammad. This view is metaphysically loaded because, of the three persons in the revelatory chain (God, Gabriel, Muhammad), two are supernatural and only one of them is historical. Even so, on a straightforward reading of the Quran, it is a view that is simply unavoidable.

97) Say: Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel – for he brings down the (revelation) to thy heart by Allah’s will, a confirmation of what went before, and guidance and glad tidings for those who believe, 98) Whoever is an enemy to Allah and His angels and apostles, to Gabriel and Michael, Lo! Allah is an enemy to those who reject faith (2: 97-8).

Quranic verses of this kind clearly establish that 1) Gabriel is a person and 2) he is the person who brought down revelation to Muhammad. Avicenna proposed that the angel is a faculty or power rather than a person. But what would it then mean to be ‘an enemy to Gabriel’? On a simple reading, it is natural to believe that Gabriel is a person because persons can have enemies. It is more convoluted to believe that Gabriel is a faculty or power that has enemies. However, it may be worthwhile to consider the Avicennan view in a charitable light. The pagan Arabs were not enemies of Muhammad but rather of his ability to be in contact with the divine. They embraced Muhammad as a good person but were enemies of his spiritual abilities, faculties, or powers. Despite our charitable view of Avicenna’s construction, it is one that is difficult to sustain. The reference to Allah’s will in verse 97, establishes Allah as a person with free will. Then verse 98 makes things very difficult indeed for the Avicennan view: ‘Whoever is an enemy to Allah and His angels and apostles …’ As Allah and the apostles are persons, and the verse refers to enemies of these persons that are also enemies of the angels, then the angels must surely also be persons. In any case, even if Gabriel were merely the Prophet’s ability (faculty) to get in touch with the divine, would Michael be some other ability
What about the angel of death (malik ul mawth)? Is the angel of death a reference to a human being’s natural ability to die? What an odd and colorful way to talk about death. However, while it is possible to allow for odd and colorful metaphor, it is not acceptable to reduce the Quran to gibberish as in the following verses:

30) Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: “I will create a vicegerent on earth.” They said, “Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? - whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?” He said: “I know what ye know not.” 31) And He taught Adam the nature of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: “Tell Me the nature of these if ye are right” 32) They said: “Glory to thee: of knowledge we have none, save what Thou hast taught us: in truth it is Thou who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom.” 33) He said, “O Adam! Tell them their natures.” When he had told them, Allah said: “Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heavens and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?” 34) And behold, We said to the angels, “Bow down to Adam”; and they bowed down: not so Iblis: he refused and was haughty: he was of those who reject Faith (2: 30-4).

If angels are human faculties or powers then who is God speaking to before the creation of man. He cannot be addressing a human faculty because in verse 30 the first human being is yet to be created. Another oddity is that in verse 31 the human faculties (angels) are challenged to tell the nature of things and fail to do so but in verse 33 the human being is ordered to tell their natures and does so successfully. One imagines that the faculties in question belong to Adam (as he is the only human being) but that raises the question as to why his faculties fail in verse 31 but he succeeds in verse 33. But if the faculties belong to Adam then the climax is verse 34 where Adam’s faculties are told to bow down to Adam! Whatever the Avicennan spin on such verses, it must necessarily be very convoluted. On a simple reading, God is addressing angelic persons and because this is evident there may be no benefit in belaboring the point.

In making the phenomenon of revelation intelligible to themselves, Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna inclined to a view that was metaphysically less burdensome than the traditional literalist view. As already mentioned, the angel was seen as a faculty or power. It was a faculty or power by which a prophet established a connection with the Active Intelligence, this last concept suggesting an impersonal view of divine being. Clearly, economy in positing supernatural persons could be seen as an excellent way to lessen the metaphysical assumptions in the revelation narrative. Gabriel could be an impersonal faculty and God could be an impersonal Intelligence. Muhammad would be left as the only personal player in the saga of revelation and all to the good because he was indeed a historical person.

In the end, it is not at all clear that the theory of revelation offered by Muslim philosophers is metaphysically simpler than the traditional literalist view. The traditional view offers personhood as basic reality, the person of God being the ultimate basic reality. The persons of Gabriel and Muhammad are further manifestations of the basic reality of personhood. As a result, the traditional theory is actually metaphysically simple, with personhood being the only basic metaphysical postulate. The traditional theory has the advantage of being in harmony
with a personal (as opposed to scientific) explanation of universal origins that is based on cosmological and teleological arguments that all rational Muslim theists must subscribe to.

It can certainly be said of Avicenna (if not every medieval Muslim philosopher) that he suffers from the same basic malaise that afflicts the Muslim interpreters of the Quran considered below (in this chapter and the next). His problem is that his engagement with philosophy of religion leaves something to be desired. In modern times, perfect being theology has made a convincing case for a personal God because the ultimate explanation of the universe has to be a perfect being, and by virtue of its perfection such a being has to be a conscious free agent, that is, it has to be a person. Avicenna has the alibi that he lived at a time when he had to rely on the works of Hellenistic philosophers who were not working in the modern analytical tradition, and who did not realize that they needed a personal being to solve the cosmoteleological puzzle. So Avicenna thought it wise to posit an impersonal Intelligence in place of God (and a faculty in place of Gabriel) even though this sent him into wild hermeneutical contortions because in the Quran (as in the Old and New Testaments) God is a person who makes decisions, feels emotion and, above all, talks like any other person. The point is that if Avicenna were to embrace state-of-the-art perfect being theology and its claim that the perfect being is a person, he would obviously then have no problem with the personhood of God and Gabriel. This is because his up-to-date philosophy of religion would establish personhood as the basic simple of the universe. As things stand, his philosophy of religion is not up-to-date or systematically thought through, and this is a problem that is shared by the interpreters of the Quran considered below.

Another problem for the Muslim philosophers including Avicenna is that they are opposed to the idea that the Prophet received a verbal revelation. Their general view is that it is an intellectual truth that a prophet grasps and that is then represented in words by his imaginative faculty. A prophet has a strong imaginative faculty that transforms into ‘sensible images and verbal modes, the universal simple truth grasped by the prophet’s intellect’. In contrast to this, the traditional literalist view is uncompromising on the point that the Prophet received a verbal revelation. Needless to say, this view has powerful textual support. The word Quran is derived from the root q-r-‘ which means ‘he read’. What was transmitted to Muhammad was the Quran, in other words, what was transmitted was a reading, something to be read. One cannot read an intellectual communion or a moral/spiritual epiphany. One reads words, not intellectual transcendences, spiritual experiences or moral meaningfulness. Long before Muhammad’s birth, the Quran (a reading) was preserved in the luh mahfuz (Preserved Tablet, 85:21-2). In numerous places (e.g. 4: 105, 113, 136) the Quran says that a kitāb (book) was sent to the Muhammad. The root of the word kitāb is k-t-b which means ‘he wrote’. Again, it is words that are written not intellectual epiphanies or moral/spiritual transcendence. What was transmitted to Muhammad was something that is read (qur’an) and written (kitāb), that is, words were transmitted to him.

In a qualified version of the Muslim philosophers’ view, Rahman accommodates this inescapable literary meaning of the Quran by saying that ‘the Word was given with the inspiration itself’ (emphasis added). So Rahman may feel that he has not engaged in an unjustifiable hermeneutics because he has embraced the fact that the Prophet received words rather than saying that his imaginative faculty chose those words. What then of his view that the Prophet articulated solutions to Arabian problems on the basis of his moral experience?
The Prophet would seem to have articulated the Quranic legislation on inheritance on the basis of his sublime moral inspiration. That, of course, would make the inheritance verses words of the Prophet rather than words of God. Such a view would then fly in the face of the traditional literal view that the Quran is God’s word. As a result, one of the hardest things to understand in Rahman’s theory is whether God is the word for word author of the Quran. He does say that the Quran is ‘pure Divine Word’ but at the same time holds that it is the Prophet’s inspiration with the moral law that allowed him to articulate specific solutions to the moral crisis in Arabia. But if the Prophet received fully formed words, he obviously did not articulate, for example, the legislation on inheritance. He simple received it. Rahman may want to say that the Quran (a reading) – a kitāb (a writing) – did not exist before the Prophet’s moral experience because it is through this moral experience that the words came into being. This goes against the traditional view that the Quran was inscribed in the Preserved Tablet (lūh mahfuz) - as something written - even before the universe was created. It is difficult to sort these matters out by reading Rahman’s works but in what follows I will attempt to make sense of his theory of revelation. The reason that the medieval Muslim philosophers seem to be less sophisticated than Rahman is that they are willing to fly in the face of the literal Quran with their view that, in his contact with the divine, the Prophet did not receive words.

One of the basic postulates that Rahman offers in order to set the stage for his liberal re-interpretation of the sources is that Muhammad’s life experience and moral-spiritual consciousness played a critical role in his inspiration with the words of the Quran. Muhammad is not seen as a passive recipient of divine inspiration. He is an organic part of the inspiration process. He had a deep moral sensitivity to the appalling social-moral conditions of 7th century Mecca, a society immersed in idol worship and socioeconomic inequality, and would retire to the cave of Hira’ for contemplation and inspiration.

We also know that Muhammad’s moral sensitivity drove him to retire periodically to the cave Hira’ outside Mecca where he spent long stretches in contemplation, and this inner process of religio-moral experience culminated in his Call during one of these deep contemplative moods.\(^6\)

For Rahman, Muhammad’s inspiration is deeply internal, and ‘his Call’ and the Quran are the culmination of an ‘inner process’ and ‘deep contemplative moods’. Rahman believes both that the Quran is divine and also that it is a sublime inspiration of Muhammad’s mind in response to the moral crises of Mecca. The Quran is an inspiration both from the divine other and of the human self. He feels there to be no contradiction in holding both these ideas at the same time and the failure to do so is the reason for the historical misinterpretation of the Quran.

But orthodoxy (indeed, all medieval thought) lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma the otherness and verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and religious personality of the Prophet on the other, i.e. it lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur’an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad.\(^7\)

Rahman is completely serious about holding these two ideas together. We are to see the Quran as the Word of God and as the moral inspiration of Muhammad. The following long passage makes this clear.
Now a Prophet is a person whose average, overall character, the sum total of his actual conduct, is far superior to those of humanity in general. He is a man who is *ab initio* impatient with men and even with most of their ideals, and wishes to re-create history. Muslim orthodoxy, therefore, drew the logically correct conclusion that Prophets must be regarded as immune from serious errors (the doctrine of ‘isma). Muhammad was such a person, in fact the only such person really known to history. That is why his overall behaviour is regarded by the Muslims as Sunna or the ‘perfect model’. But, with all this, there were moments when he, as it were, ‘transcends himself’ and his moral cognitive perception becomes so acute and so keen that his consciousness becomes identical with the moral law itself. ‘Thus did we inspire you with a Spirit of Our Command: You did not know what the Book was. But we have made it a light’ (XLII, 52). But the moral law and religious values are God’s Command, and although they are not identical with God entirely, they are a part of Him. The Qur’an is, therefore, purely divine. Further, even with regard to ordinary consciousness, it is a mistaken notion that ideas and feelings float about in it and can be mechanically ‘clothed’ in words. There exists, indeed, an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words. In inspiration, even in poetic inspiration, this relationship is so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own. When Muhammad’s moral intuitive perception rose to the highest point and became identified with the moral law itself..., the Word was given with the inspiration itself. The Qur’an is thus pure Divine Word, but, of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record. The Divine Word flowed through the Prophet’s heart.  

Rahman unequivocally declares that the Quran is ‘pure Divine Word’. At the same time, he is equally unequivocal that the Prophet’s feelings, ideas, and the words of the Quran were organically related and all very much integral to his inner life. This sublime intermeshing of Muhammad’s feelings and ideas on the one hand, and the words of the Quran on the other, means that if God created the Quran (‘pure Divine Word’) He did so during the Prophet’s moral epiphanies. Rahman’s view has to be that there was no Quran before the Prophet had his moral epiphanies because he is saying that Quranic words are inextricably bound with Muhammad’s feelings and ideas (‘organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words’). His view cannot be that the Quran existed before the moral epiphanies because then all that he would be saying is that the Prophet could access God’s words during his epiphanies. He is clearly not saying this because he does not believe that the Prophet replayed God’s words ‘like... a record’. In the second to last quoted passage, he said that the Quran is ‘entirely the work of Muhammad’ and this statement can only be true if Muhammad is an integral part of the creation process. He seems to believe that the moral epiphanies are a deeply creative communion of the Prophet with God, creative because they result in the joint (simultaneous?) conception of the verbal Quran. Rahman’s final view is that ‘the Qur’an is thus pure Divine Word, but, of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad... ’ (emphasis added). This is a view that contradicts the traditional literal view that the Prophet received a verbal revelation that was composed beforehand by God. As usual, the traditional view has powerful textual support:
This Quran is not such as can be produced by other than Allah (min doo nillahi); on the contrary it is a confirmation of (revelations) that went before it and a fuller explanation of the Book – wherein there is no doubt – from the Lord of the Worlds (10:37).

From a literal standpoint, such a verse is a fatal blow to Rahman’s theory of revelation. The words ‘[from] other than Allah (min doo nillahi)’ are unequivocal and are used elsewhere in the Quran to similar effect (e.g. 10: 38; 11: 13; 18: 26–7). The phrase ‘from near other than Allah’ (min indi ghair allah) is also used in the context of attributing sole authorship to Allah (4: 82). The verse quoted above is literally saying that only Allah is capable of producing the Quran with the direct implication that Muhammad’s moral epiphanies are not an essential ingredient for its creation. Allah lays claim to the very words of the Quran:

And recite (and teach) what has been revealed to thee of the Book (root k-t-b) of thy Lord; none can change His Words (kalimaatihī), and none wilt thou find as a refuge other than Him (min doo nihī) (18:27)

So the words of the Quran are God’s words. If God and Muhammad chose these words jointly (simultaneously?) then why did the Quran not simply say so? On the contrary, the following verses portray Muhammad as a person who followed Gabriel’s recitation.

16) Move not thy tongue concerning the (Quran) to make haste therewith. 17) It is for us to collect it and recite (root q-r-?) it 18) But when we have recited (root q-r-?) it, follow thou its recital (root q-r-?) 19 Nay more, it is for us to explain it (and make it clear) (75: 16-9; but see 6: 106; 46: 9 and also 20:114).

There are two strong reasons for believing that verse 18 is telling the Prophet to recite after Gabriel. The first is the reference to his tongue in verse 16. The verse does not refer to his mind or tell him to compose the words slower as if he is composing too fast for God to keep up. The reference is to his tongue and so he is being told to repeat the words patiently. The second reason is that verse 18 has two possible readings. It could mean either that after God’s recital the Prophet should obey (‘follow thou’) that recital (in other words, the Prophet should obey God’s command) or that after God’s recital the Prophet should simply repeat the words. The former reading is weak because it would be an odd use of language to ask someone to obey a recital (as opposed to a command). The latter reading is the correct one because in verse 19 God takes it upon Himself to explain the verses and this would have to be done before rather than after obedience. The natural order is recite-explain-obey and not recite-obey-explain. Therefore, verses 16-18 are all about recitation (not obedience) because verse 19 is about explanation (about making things clear) after which obedience could naturally follow. As verses 16-18 are only about recitation, the Prophet is being told to recite after God (or rather after Gabriel who is God’s messenger). The whole tenor of the Quran supports this literal view.

Nothing is said (root q-w-l) to thee that was not said (root q-w-l) to the apostles before thee (41: 43)

So something is (literally) being said to the Prophet as opposed to him conceiving it. Again

We certainly gave (root a-t-y) Moses the Book aforetime (41: 45; see also 25: 35; 6: 20)
So something (the Book) is (literally) given to the prophet who would logically have to receive what is given rather than create it. It should also be noted that the Quran is quite serious about this view.

43. (This is) a Message sent down from the Lord of the Worlds 44. And if the apostle were to invent any sayings (root q-w-l) in Our name 45. We should certainly seize him by his right hand 46. And We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart 47. Nor could any of you withhold him (from Our wrath). (69: 43-7)

So whatever is said (sayings (root q-w-l)) to the Prophet is something he better pass on - without becoming creative in God’s name - on pain of fairly strict disciplinary action against him. The metaphor that comes to mind is a military one with the commander-in-chief giving battlefield instructions to the second-in-command which the latter must convey exactly to the other commanders on pain of something much worse than court martial.

I will take the liberty of putting labels on two distinct strands that Rahman brings together in the long passage quoted above (p. 78). The first strand is religious faith and a personal belief in God. The second strand is Kantian and is compatible with offering a nonreligious explanation of Muhammad’s experience. Through personal faith Rahman accepts that the moral law is ‘a part of’ God, but bringing God into the picture is merely Rahman’s personal religious preference. The way his theory is constructed (in harmony with the theories of medieval Muslim philosophers), a personal God is not needed for the revelation process. An atheist may see Muhammad’s awareness of the impersonal moral law as a nonreligious (Kantian) phenomenon. This second (Kantian) strand smack of Enlightenment liberalism. Why posit God in every explanation? Humans evolved through natural selection and even if God exists He is not meddling and interfering with the process of evolution. Physical objects move according to natural laws (inertia, law of conservation of energy and momentum etc.) and even if God exists He is not meddling and interfering in every motion. The Enlightenment relegated God to the back seat in physics and biology thus creating greater space for human autonomy and freedom in ethics and politics. Liberals tend to favor autonomy over authority and it is the liberal within Rahman that is drawn to the Kantian second strand in the passage above. It is the liberal within Rahman that finds appealing Muhammad’s critical and organic role in the process of Quranic inspiration. I conjecture that at the back of his mind Rahman is pleased that he can say ‘look, even if you don’t believe in God, Muhammad’s experience is sublime and of profound value to humanity’.

The liberal tendency Rahman is exhibiting is the preference for a minimalist metaphysics. Muhammad is a person of character ‘far superior to those of humanity in general’, who from the start is ‘impatient with men and even with most of their ideals, and wishes to re-create history’, and whose moral sensitivity and perception can become so acute that he becomes intimately conscious of the moral law. All of these are ingredients for a quasi-naturalistic (Kantian) Enlightenment explanation of the origins of Islam (quasi and not fully naturalistic only because the moral law is not a natural feature of the universe). It would seem that Muhammad could have pulled it all off without God, Gabriel and the metaphysical works. It is coffee without caffeine and sugar, an explanation the way liberals like it, light on the metaphysics. From the believer’s point of view, the only redeeming feature is Rahman’s own faith in God. But, as I said, this is purely personal preference.
Rahman has almost no basis whatever for the story he is telling about Muhammad. We do not independently know that he was far superior to humanity in general (though on the basis of our faith we believe he was superior); we do not know whether he was ‘impatient with men’ and ‘with most of their ideals’ or rather a more realistic and less idealistic person somewhat resigned to the way things were in Mecca; we do not know whether he wished ‘to re-create history’ though it is clear that he would have liked to see some changes as would any normal human being; and we certainly do not know that his moral potential was so tremendous that his consciousness could become identical with the moral law. The trillion dollar question is whether the honest and trustworthy Meccan businessman was the passive recipient of divine revelation or whether he was rather the restless creative type who was thus organically part of the inspiration process. Rahman has a theory and no evidence.

Literally, the Quran says that Muhammad is a messenger (7: 158; 48: 8-9, 29).

Muhammad is no more than a messenger (root r-s- l) (3: 144).

The root of the Arabic word for messenger is r-s-l and this means ‘he sent’. In other words, Muhammad was no more than a man who was sent. We are emphatically and repeatedly told that Muhammad’s work is but to deliver a warning (e.g. 7: 184). Muhammad is to God, as a messenger is to the king who sends him. The king has sent this messenger with a warning. The messenger does not have any role in the process of having the inspiration and composing the content of the message. So, if anything, the Quran refutes Rahman’s theory at a conceptual level.  

At best, the profound inspirational creativity that Rahman envisions for the Prophet is an act of personal interpretation on his part, and he does not defend his interpretation with historical evidence from the life of Muhammad before the beginning of the prophetic mission (when such creativity may have been active independent of God). Needless to say it would be very difficult to find any relevant evidence, and that any such evidence would in any case be neutralized by the opposing theory that God was guiding Muhammad even before the mission began. The basic principle that Muhammad had a normal life before the mission, that he was a man with wife and children, that he was concerned with the mundane (e.g. the marriage of his daughters and the finances of his uncle), that he was generally a good and honest man of above average moral-intellectual caliber, that there is no evidence of any deep learning of other religions he may have had, that there is no evidence of any poetic skill he may have had, that there is no evidence of a restless creativity but perhaps rather a sadness at the moral conditions in Mecca, such a basic principle of Muhammad’s all-round normality is a good one to go by and the burden of proof is on those who instead wish to show that Muhammad was a moral-intellectual star of gigantic proportions. The Quran is unequivocal that Muhammad was chosen for the mission and God chooses whom He wills. The reasons for this divine choice are quite simply unknown and must seem to have to do with Muhammad’s soul and its ability to choose truth over falsehood rather than on the basis of world transforming moral-intellectual skills (the point being that an Arab businessman may have a soul that reliably chooses truth over falsehood but may not have anything close to the skills and knowledge needed to transform the world). Thus, Rahman’s view, as exhibited in the following passage, of Muhammad’s will as architect of Islam’s origins, has quite insufficient evidential basis.
On the other hand, despite Muhammad’s reticence, an equally determined will unfailingly come through, a will that spurns compromises on fundamental issues. One does not need to remind oneself that a man with his mixture of opposing mental traits and conscious of a “heavy mission,” as the Qur’an says, must be engaged in a constant inner dialectic – the ideal moral state for man to be in, according to the Qur’an. The verses in sura 53, where the Prophet had reportedly made concessions to the goddesses of the Meccan pagans that were subsequently “abrogated,” is, along with other Qur’anic evidence, a direct proof of this phenomenon. The second side of the Prophet, his determination, finally won over his other side. If there were an artist in the world who could portray pure moral states, the Prophet’s picture would emerge as most interesting, attractive, and significant.11

There is no evidence to suggest that the Prophet was ‘engaged in a constant inner dialectic’. His thoughts may have been as simple as ‘this is what God wants me to do, if only I could do it better.’ I am not saying that he did not deeply appreciate the moral implications of his actions, but to say that it was his ‘opposing mental traits’ and ‘constant inner dialectic’ that determined when concessions were to be made suggests that he was navigating the Meccan labyrinth on the basis of his rich inner life and there is no basis for such a claim (unless we simply assume that naturalistic explanations are superior). Further, in saying that it is the Prophet’s determination that ‘finally won over his other side’ it is implied that his determination is a root cause of the victory of Islamic monotheism whereas his determination may have only been an intermediary cause because it was limited to doing the best job possible in implementing God’s instructions, such instructions being the root cause of the victory.

As minimalist metaphysician, Rahman wants to do away with the externality of the angel Gabriel and say instead that the message came to Muhammad’s heart with no physical angelic appearance12, he wants to do away with similar metaphysical items such as the beast that transported Muhammad during his heavenly ascension (mir’aj) while the ascension itself he dismisses as ‘no more than a historical fiction’13, he wants to do away with the predictive powers that Muhammad seems to demonstrate in many of the hadith (reports of his sayings and deeds), and he even wants to do away with God’s knowledge of the future (e.g. knowledge of the future outcome of the Romano-Persian wars and, more understandably perhaps, of future human (free) choices)14. Yet, as a man of faith Rahman writes:

In pursuance of this picture, belief in one God stands at the apex of the Muslim system of belief derived from the Qur’an. From this belief is held to follow belief in angels (spirits of the Command) as transmitters of the Divine message to man, in the Prophets, the human repositories of the Divine revelation (the last in the series being Muhammad), in the genuineness of the messages of the Prophets, the ‘Book’, and in the Day of Reckoning.15

As a believer, Rahman’s existential universe is populated with metaphysical beings, creatures, and events, from God and the angels to the ‘Day of Reckoning’. Why he is then averse to having one of these entities pop into the Prophet’s visual field is something of a mystery. One could simply put it down to his liberal sensibilities and the associated metaphysical minimalism. But there is a visible tension here. What kind of a metaphysical minimalist believes in God, the devil, tens or hundreds of thousands (maybe millions and billions) of angels and jinn, Resurrection, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. Why argue so profusely that the
The point is liberal hermeneutics. With the minimalist metaphysics Rahman is able to secure for the Prophet a critical and organic role in the Quranic inspiration rather than the diminished role of messenger given to him in Islamic tradition. The Prophet is deeply sensitive to the situation on the ground in Mecca and is inspired with a response – the Quran. This inspiration comes from a consciousness of the universal (and very general) moral law. It is the Prophet who applies this general law to the specific context of Meccan society. Herein we witness the construction of Rahman’s primary weapon against tradition and literalism both avowed enemies of the committed liberal. This weapon is the principle that if the Prophet applied the universal moral law to his specific circumstances, we should do the same. We should not literally follow every injunction in the Quran or issued by the Prophet because that is not what the Prophet wanted us to do. If we really want to follow the Prophet, we have to rise to a consciousness of the moral law and then apply it to the specific circumstances of our lives. That’s what the Prophet did. Rahman cites the Prophet’s strict regulations on slavery and polygamy as examples of a context specific application of the universal moral principles of freedom and egalitarianism. An outright abolition of slavery and polygamy would have destabilized Meccan and Medinese society and proved counter-productive to the Prophet’s overall mission. So in an application that was keenly sensitive to prevailing social realities, a temporary compromise on universal principles was offered in order to secure them fully at a later time when social conditions were more favorable. Thus, while the Prophet did not abolish slavery or polygamy he did encourage the attainment of slave-free monogamous societies in word and deed (with nine wives and two concubines?? Odd for a man who led by his own example). Referring to the cases of slavery and polygamy Rahman says:

These examples, therefore, make it abundantly clear that whereas the spirit of the Qur’anic legislation exhibits an obvious direction towards the progressive embodiment of the fundamental human values of freedom and responsibility in fresh legislation, nevertheless the actual legislation of the Qur’an had partly to accept the then existing society as a term of reference. This clearly means that the actual legislation of the Qur’an cannot have been meant to be literally eternal by the Qur’an itself.16

This is to be the death blow against literalism. The universal moral law espouses freedom and the Prophet was inspired by this universal law. He wisely applied this law only in a limited way in Mecca and Medina in order to avoid social disruption. But this means that it is our responsibility to complete the work that he began. We must abolish slavery and polygamy because ‘the spirit of the Qur’anic legislation exhibits an obvious direction towards the progressive embodiment of the fundamental human values of freedom and responsibility in fresh legislation.’ It is our work to produce the fresh legislation that applies the universal value of freedom to our specific context.

To insist on a literal interpretation of the rules of the Qur’an, shutting one’s eyes to the social change that has occurred and that is so palpably occurring before our eyes, is tantamount to deliberately defeating its moral-social purposes and objectives. It is just as though, in view of the Qur’anic emphasis on freeing slaves, one were to insist on preserving the institution of slavery so that one could “earn merit in the sight of God” by freeing slaves. Surely the whole tenor of the Qur’an is that there should be no
slavery at all... Or, again, to say that, no matter how much women may develop intellectually, their evidence must on principle carry less value than that of a man is an outrageous affront to the Qur’an’s purposes of social evolution – and so on.¹⁷

So even though the Quran literally deems slavery and polygamy permissible such permissions are only relics of bygone social realities and must be demolished. They are against the universal moral law that is a part of God and so they are against Islam. It may be useful for the reader to hear the obvious literalist response to all this. The literalist will simply deny the existence of a moral law. He will say that all that matters is the will of God as expressed in the language of the Quran. He may also go on the offensive against Rahman and point out that, for a minimalist metaphysician, the positing of a moral law is extravagant metaphysics. Rahman would do well to abandon his minimalism because his belief in a freely creating God is more consistent with and allows him to look forward to all sorts of metaphysical company including dead people, angels, and jinn. And once the minimalism is abandoned there is no problem with accepting the physical appearance of the angel and thus the vastly diminished role of Muhammad at the beginning of Islam. With the Prophet back in his diminished traditional role as messenger there will be no more need to say that he became conscious of the moral law, or even that there is a moral law.

2. The Order of Conceptual Priority

One of the main purposes of Chapter 1 (sections 1-4) is to demonstrate that we should arrive at faith through reason. Reason is our guide in the journey in search of truth. With reason, we enter upon a philosophical and scientific quest for the truth. We are able to discover not only that it is rational to believe in God but also, as I suggest in Appendix 1, that it is rational to believe in Allah. Belief in Allah’s existence may well be the endpoint of our journey in search of truth and it will be the endpoint if we die before discovering a fact more significant than the rationality of belief in Him. Chapter 1 also reminds us that we do not know that Allah is the Truth (epistemic limits; metaphysical deafness-blindness). We only rationally believe that He is.

All that I just said comes naturally to me in describing the journey to faith. Yet all of this should also sound reminiscent of the Quran. The Quran also describes a journey to faith that is essentially the same. The steps are as follows. In our search for truth, we must use reason to explore the universe, history, and inner life. If we do this with sincerity we will realize that it is rational to believe in Allah. We should die in this state of rationality, that is, with belief in Allah. Before death, we will not see Allah (He is Unseen) and will never know (certainly not through sensory experience) that He is the Truth (2:210; 3:179).

The lesson I would like to draw from this description of the journey to faith is an order of priority that we find in the Quran. Truth and reason come first. The single most important idea in the Quran is that of truth (haqq).¹⁸ This is evident in the fact that of the names of Allah, al-Haqq (the Reality, the Truth, 20:114; 22:6, 62; 31:30) is far and away the most important. There is hardly any point in being Eternal, All-knowing, All-powerful, and so on if all this is just another tall story, that is, if these things are not real and true. While many things are real and true, of all things that deserve to be called real and true, Allah as al-Haqq tops the list.¹⁹ He is a necessary being, and reality and truth are of His essence. Moreover, all of creation depends on Him for its reality and existence (112: 2). As the whole aim of the Quran is to guide human
beings to this Reality and Truth, no human quality is of higher value for it than the yearning to discover truth (lover of truth (sadiq), 4:69). The Quran appeals directly to this yearning and repeatedly warns against concealing the truth: “And cover not truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth when you know (what it is)” (2:42, also 2:146; 3:71, 75, 78; 6:28). There are also numerous warnings against inventing lies (3:94; 4:171; 6:21, 24, 93; 7:37, 169), and trespassing beyond truth (5:80; 7:33, 146).

For the Quran, the concept of truth is supreme. Truth is more important than Allah, that is, the concept of truth is more important than the concept of the One God. This is self-evident because the whole argument to believe in the One God rests on an appeal to the truth. The Quran tells us to believe in Allah because He is the Truth. “This is the true account; there is no god except Allah” (italics added) (3:62; also 6:19, 30). The Quran establishes its authority over us by an appeal to the truth. Allah is the truth, the Book is sent in truth, the Apostles are sent in truth (4:170; 7:43, 53, 104-5), and so on (see p. 157). Thus, Allah is not more important than the truth, rather the concept of truth is what gives supreme importance to the concept of the One God. Allah is the Truth and it is this that makes Him supreme.

The primacy of truth sets the tone for everything else. Reason (‘aql) and knowledge (‘ilm) are necessary to arrive at truth. With regard to the use of reason and acquisition of knowledge, the natural resource in our possession is our mind and the five senses. Through assiduous use of a rich variety of words in a rich variety of contexts, the Quran makes it plain that it wants us to use this natural resource in order to search for truth. It uses words from the roots b-s-r (see), s-m-’ (hear), sh-’r (become aware), and ‘r-f (recognize) to convey the ideas that we should acquire knowledge and be open to the truth. It uses words from the root f-k-r (think, consider, meditate) to tell us to think deeply, for example, “God makes clear to you His signs in hopes you will think deeply” (tafakkurun, 2:219, also 30:21); “We have sent down to you the message so you can explain clearly to people what is sent for them, so hopefully they will think deeply” (tafakkurun, 16:44); and those endowed with understanding “think deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth” (tafakkurun, 3:191). While roots such as f-q-h (understand, 6:98; 7:179) and f-h-m (understand, 21:79) and others are also used to convey the vital necessity of using the mind, the root that is most important in this regard is ‘q-l (understand, comprehend). Derivatives of this root are the noun ‘aql (reason, comprehension, mind, intellect) and the verb ‘aqala (to understand, think, intellect, be prudent or sagacious). The verb ‘aqala occurs forty-nine times in the Quran. In many places, we learn that God gives signs in nature, history, miracles of the prophets, and scripture in order that we may understand (ya’qilun, 2:73, 164, 242; 3:118; 12:109; 13:4; 16:12, 67; 22:46; 23:80; 24:61; 29:35, 63; 30:24, 28; 45:5; 57:17). God’s commands are also, in some sense, signs (see pp. 163-4) as they are expected to lead to understanding: “Do not take life, which Allah has forbidden, except for some just cause. Thus He commands you per chance you may understand (ya’qilun)” (6:151, emphasis added). The root ‘q-l is commonly used with the purpose of admonishing readers sometimes with the exhortation ‘will you not then understand’ (2:44, 75; 5:58, 103; 6:32; 21:10; 22:46; 23:80; 26:28; 29:63; 49:4; 67:10). In other places, we are told that the unbelievers are like cattle in that they do not understand (la ya’qilun, 2:171; 25:44). The Quran is itself sent down so that perhaps we will understand (ya’qilun, 12:2; 43:3).

In four consecutive verses of Surah al-Rum (30:21-4), after drawing attention to various signs of God, the Quran tells us that these are signs for those who think deeply (tafakkurun, 30:21),
those who know (alimin, 30:22), those who listen (yusma’un, 30:23), and those who understand (ya’qilun, 30:24). So the Quran leaves us no room to think that its basic appeal is other than to human rationality. We are to use our mind and five senses according to the deepest principles of reason in order to embark on a rational exploration of truth. On this journey, our rational use of mind and senses will give us knowledge. It is through this use of reason, and growth of knowledge and understanding, that we are to arrive at faith. Keep in mind that many people do not succeed in this journey: “Many are the jinns and people we have made for Hell; they have hearts wherewith they understand not (la yafqahun, from the root f-q-h)” (7:179); “Do they not travel through the land so that their hearts may understand (ya’qilun) and their ears may learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but the hearts that are in their breasts” (22:46). Unbelievers experience a failure of understanding. They fail to use their mind and senses in order to pursue knowledge for the sake of attaining true understanding. If they use their mind and senses to pursue desires (‘appetites unchecked by knowledge’ 6:119) rather than knowledge, then this is irrational because without knowledge there is no basis for attaining a deeper understanding of the human condition. The use of mind and senses to acquire knowledge, and then thinking deeply on the knowledge thus acquired is what leads to understanding. And this understanding then gives further focus to the mind and senses to acquire further knowledge and thus deeper understanding. This upward spiraling stairwell to true understanding is to be governed by the deepest principles of reason both in using mind and senses and in thinking deeply.

We can now say that the order of conceptual priority in the Quran is as follows. Truth comes first. Reason is second along with its concomitants of knowledge and understanding. Truth and reason, or more specifically, a rational exploration of the truth gives us belief in Allah. So Allah is third. This is because truth and reason establish the basic conceptual framework through which Allah is discovered. Once it is discovered that belief in Allah is rational, we bring into our practical lives the All-knowing and All-powerful being. As a result, we should expect nothing less than a full transformation of our lives. Now that we are face to face with the All-knowing and All-powerful being, it immediately follows that we must observe any symbols (of submission) that He gives us (see pp. 161-3). For example, He gave Zachariah the symbol not to speak to anyone for three days. Similarly, He gave Muslims the symbol to pray five times a day. When Satan did not attend to the symbol of bowing down to Adam, God consigned him to eternal damnation (see pp. 163-5). So this is simply a question of personal salvation. Ask any believer, as soon as we believe, we submit. This is why if Allah is the third conceptual priority of the Quran, then the priority that immediately follows is to observe His symbols (of submission). So once we realize that it is rational to believe in Allah, the first order of business (and thus the fourth conceptual priority of the Quran) is to observe His symbols.

Fifth on the list of conceptual priorities could be social morality. At least this much is certain that on the list of priorities it must rank below observance of divine symbol. I stand as a believer before Allah, as one of the mu’minun “whose hearts tremble with awe whenever Allah is mentioned” (8:2). Given my belief in the All-powerful, observance of symbol is immediate. As I stand before Allah, there is an immediacy and inevitability that I feel regarding what I have to do. This is about me as an individual, it is my salvation, and no one else matters. Under these circumstances, society and social morality are not yet on my mind and I think only of obeying Allah. Of course, if Allah’s command is to be friendly with my neighbor, it is through my respect for His commands that social morality enters the picture.
In the following pages, we will see that Rahman fails to attain a clear view of the order of conceptual priority in the Quran. This causes him to value morality over symbol thus defying our ordering in the last paragraph. Such failures and errors become a part of his general hermeneutics and I will illustrate these problems in the case of his interpretation of the *riba* verses. It is to these issues that we now turn. We begin our investigation in the next section by seeing that Rahman’s metaphysical minimalism (Section 1 above) is the source of a serious tension in his worldview between the functionality of God and His existence.

3. Functionality versus Existence

Metaphysical minimalism is in natural tension with Islamic faith because, as the Quran tells us, Allah creates what He wills without limit. He is not a minimalist creator of metaphysical creatures, places, and events. So there is necessarily a tension in Rahman’s mind as to how to balance his minimalism and his faith, and at times it appears that the minimalism gets the upper hand even threatening the metaphysical existence of God.

The Qur’an is a document that is squarely aimed at man; indeed, it calls itself “guidance for mankind” (*hudan il’-nas* [2:185] and numerous equivalents elsewhere)... the Qur’an is no treatise about God and His nature: His existence, for the Qur’an, is strictly functional – He is the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe and of man, and particularly the giver of guidance for man and He who judges man, individually and collectively, and metes out to him merciful justice.

Something that jumps right out of this passage is the claim that ‘the Qur’an is no treatise about God and His nature’. This is a bold assertion to say the least, given that the Quran is heavily preoccupied with the subject of God. We may have to consider whether we can edit Rahman, and have him say something much softer, such as that the Quran is not only concerned with the metaphysical reality of God, but rather with practical matters of morality and justice as well. Having made the bold claim, Rahman continues by saying that ‘[God’s] existence, for the Qur’an, is strictly functional’. The problem with this idea of strict functionality is that God’s existence then seems to depend on humanity, or more specifically, on being functional in various capacities for humanity (e.g. as guide for humanity). If He were not functioning in any capacity for humanity, it is not clear whether He would exist. For example, if God did not function as Creator of the universe and of humanity, then as a strictly functional being, would He not cease to exist? If the functionality is so strict, then it would seem to undermine God’s factuality. He is in the Quran to play a functional role rather than a factual one. Elsewhere Rahman uses similar language:

Although both God consciousness and the conviction of the Last Day are powerful and persistent themes in the Qur’an, there is no doubt that belief in God and human accountability play a strictly functional role there. The central concern of the Qur’an is the conduct of man.

If ‘belief in God’ plays a ‘strictly functional role’ then are we to understand that there is nothing beyond the functionality of this belief? Are we to understand that the belief is functional but not true (factual)? If this is what Rahman is saying then he would simply not be
a Muslim, and so I will not interpret him in this way because we have already seen that he is a Muslim (‘the Qur’an is pure Divine Word’). But Rahman does not make our task easy.

The word Allah (God) appears in the Qur’an some 2,500 times. As one tries to understand His meaning, it becomes clear that it is not important to know what God is but what He does and what His relationship to humanity is. The Qur’an is oriented to human beings and their private and public conduct. If there were one person in the world, I don’t know what the Qur’an would tell him or her to do or think or how to behave. But the Qur’an is certain that when there is more than one human being, then God is there.31

There seems to be a veritable crisis of balancing minimalism and faith especially with that last sentence which says (correct me if I am wrong) that if there were only one human being the Quran may fail to entertain that counterfactual situation with the absolute certainty that Allah would exist even then. The passage begins in a more reasonable way with Rahman acknowledging how difficult or impossible it is to know what Allah is. He says that what matters from a human perspective is Allah’s relationship to humanity and not so much the metaphysics of what He is. All of that seems fair. It is really the second half of the passage when the hypothetical one person scenario is posed that betrays a serious confusion in Rahman’s mind. After all, human beings can be at a complete loss to say what Allah is and yet believe that He exists independent of humanity. The metaphysics of Allah truly are obscure but that He is a metaphysical truth is not an obscure point to human understanding. But on Rahman’s understanding of the Quran, in the one person scenario the Quran cannot seem to find a function for God (in relation to humanity) and this puts into question (the certainty of) His very existence.

If God’s existence is questionable when there is only one person, why is His existence any less questionable when there are many people? With no answer to this question, God’s existence simply is questionable and Rahman is seriously contemplating a strictly functional and nonfactual role for God. He may not be committed to such a view but he is seriously contemplating it as his philosophical position. So the minimalism-faith tension is both real and ugly. It is not, as some would have it, just a tension that is apparent in Rahman’s words. There are other times when Rahman, apparently and with much caution, seems to edge towards the view that God is real.

[In] Qur’anic terms no real morality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the Last Judgment. Further, their very moral function requires that they exist for religiomoral experience and cannot be mere intellectual postulates to be “believed in”.32

Here God’s strict functionality is qualified and He is declared to be more real than a ‘mere intellectual postulate to be “believed in”’. But does this qualify God for full existence? Apparently not because He still seems to be something that must exist only for religiomoral experience. In fact it is His ‘moral function’ that ‘requires’ Him to exist for such experience and to be more than a mere intellectual postulate. So the moral functionality again seems to be ascendant over the existence. As long as He is there for religiomoral experience, that is, as long as believers’ believe He exists, and are moral because of their belief, it seems not to matter
whether He really exists. So we still do not have a repeat of the earlier unequivocal statement that ‘the Qur’an is pure Divine Word’.

On this point, the Quran itself, of course, is absolutely uncompromising. For the Quran, before there was the universe, man, or issues of how man should behave, there was Allah. He was the eternal First (al-awwal). After the universe is gone there will still be Allah. He is the eternal Last (al-aakhir). If Allah had never created man, He, of course, would still have existed. He exists necessarily and regardless of anything else. If Rahman is a theist who subscribes to (ontologically) necessary being theology then he seems here to experience a lapse of memory.\(^{33}\) He seems to shy away from saying that this necessary existence of Allah is the substantive teaching of the Quran. After accepting God as the transcendent anchoring point of (among other things) moral values, in the very next paragraph he suggests that His transcendent existence is not the substantive teaching of the Quran.

“But the substantive or "constitutive" – as Kantian phraseology would have it – teaching of the Prophet and the Qur’an is undoubtedly for action in this world, since it provides guidance for man concerning his behaviour on earth in relation to other men. God exists in the mind of the believer to regulate his behaviour if he is religiomorally experienced, but that which is to be regulated is the essence of the matter.\(^{34}\)

Thus, for Rahman, the substantive teaching is moral, not metaphysical. ‘God exists in the mind of the believer to regulate his behaviour’ and human behaviour is ‘that which is to be regulated’ and ‘is the essence of the matter’. God exists in our minds in order to fulfill the function of morality regulator. This falls in line with Rahman’s view that God finds a place in the Quran because He has a strictly functional role to play in making human beings moral.

God is a dimension in human presence. He intervenes between person and person, and this is why the concept of human conduct vis-à-vis other humans is central in Quranic teaching.\(^{35}\)

I agree that ‘God is a dimension in human presence’ as long as that is not all that He is. In support of his view, Rahman cites the Quranic verse (58:7) that says when there are three people God is the fourth and when four God is the fifth and so on. But how would he deal with the verse that says that God is between a man and his heart (8: 24; see also 50:16)? There are no interpersonal issues in such a verse so perhaps he would look at it as a reference to the presence of the concept of God in an individual mind. I think Rahman does finally manage to strike a better balance between minimalism and faith, especially in his definition of taqwa (God-consciousness) as ‘a mental state of responsibility from which an agent’s actions proceed but which recognizes that the criterion of judgment upon them lies outside him.’\(^{36}\) The concepts of God and Judgment in the Quran instill an inner sense of responsibility called taqwa. As the ‘criterion of judgment’ ‘lies outside’ it is obviously metaphysical. But it could still be merely the nonreligious moral law and not God. However, the Quran says it is God and Rahman says that ‘undoubtedly the Qur’an is revealed in its entirety’\(^{37}\). So for Rahman personally it is God and the moral law is a part of God, as we saw earlier. Because Rahman’s own ‘mental state of responsibility’ ‘recognizes that the criterion of judgment’ ‘lies outside’ we have to say that in the end Rahman does come to terms with the truth of God’s existence. At one point, he says that God’s existence is a metaphysical truth.
This is how the Qur’an comes to emphasize and re-emphasize the power and majesty of God. But while this *metaphysical truth* is the real reason, there is a historical dimension to this emphasis as well and that is the polytheism of the pagan Arabs, who invoked and worshipped many deities besides God. (Italics added)\textsuperscript{38}

We are at the end of our roller coaster analysis of Rahman’s balance of minimalism and faith. It may be that Rahman’s faith is secure but we must accept that his balancing act causes tremendous confusion. In referring to God as a ‘metaphysical truth’, Rahman is acknowledging the factual nature of His existence. While this comes as a relief, Rahman’s view of God as metaphysical truth is in contradiction with his view of God as strictly functional. This contradiction points to a confusion in Rahman’s mind about the order of conceptual priority in the Quran. Is morality the single most important concept and is God merely a mental concept that functions as morality regulator? Or is it rather Allah as *al Haqq* (the Reality, the Truth) that is the single most important concept? Is God simply playing a functional role in order for human beings to attain morality? Or does Allah exist regardless of any function He may fulfill?

Rahman contradicts himself because he is a believer and this is why he is important for our analysis. As I said before, I am interested only in the believer’s interpretation of the texts because I am attending to the question of whether their hermeneutics are consistent with their theistic belief. As believers, we believe in the *fact* of Allah’s existence. This existence is a metaphysical truth and is not strictly functional. In saying that His existence is strictly functional, Rahman gives an appearance of flirting with disbelief. Here I am not interested in Rahman in his capacity as doubter or disbeliever. All I am interested in is that as a believer he cannot maintain the view of God’s existence as strictly functional. As a rational believer, he must acknowledge the *fact* that Allah exists and thus acknowledge the primacy of (metaphysical) truth and specifically the priority of truth over morality in the order of Quranic conceptual priorities. As someone who believes in Allah and sees His existence as strictly functional, Rahman comes across as an irrational believer, one who has not yet resolved the contradictions in his mind.

4. Rahman’s Ordering of Conceptual Priorities

Having said that Rahman is confused about the proper order of conceptual priorities, it should be noted that he issues a number of unequivocal statements regarding the primacy of morality.

We have explicitly stated in the preceding chapter that the basic *élan* of the Qur’an is moral, whence flows its emphasis on monotheism as well as on social justice... In the foregoing we have repeatedly emphasized that the basic *élan* of the Qur’an is moral and we have pointed to the ideas of social and economic justice that immediately followed from it in the Qur’an. This is absolutely true so far as man and his destiny are concerned.\textsuperscript{39}

Thus, from the perspective of a human agent (‘so far as man and his destiny are concerned’) the basic thrust of the Quran is moral and belief in the one God flows from it (‘whence flows its emphasis on monotheism’) and is the transcendental anchoring point for it. As stated in the
following passage, moral values are the ‘crucial pivot’ of the system of theology, ethics, and law.

Muslims scholars have never attempted an ethics of the Qur’an, systematically or otherwise. Yet no one who has done a careful study of the Qur’an can fail to be impressed by its ethical fervour. Its ethics, indeed, is its essence, and it is also the necessary link between theology and law... The moral values are the crucial pivot of the entire overall system, and from them flows the law.\(^{40}\)

Rahman elevates morality and human conduct to being the highest aim of the Quran, even higher than establishing the truth of God’s existence. “[The Qur’an’s] primary aim is to maximize moral energy”\(^{41}\) and “the aim of the Qur’an is man and his behaviour, not God”\(^{42}\). Thus, for Rahman, the order of conceptual priority seems to be morality followed by Allah as the transcendental anchoring point of moral behavior (as the morality regulator).

Whatever Rahman’s final view, he is certainly not falling in line with the order of priority listed in section 2: truth, reason, Allah, symbol, morality. \textit{Au contraire}, he wants to begin with the very last item on the list, namely morality. But this is a move that we simply cannot allow. There is far too much spade work that the Quran has to do before getting to the subject of human morality. The Quran’s very first job is to tell us that it is going to give us some big and exciting news. Of course, the thing about this news is that it is true, and this is precisely why we should be so excited about it. When the Meccans heard that Muhammad was claiming to be the Messenger of God, those who believed him (and these are the people we’re interested in) would immediately have thought of the existence of the amazing supernatural being that was sending the message. This is simply how the human mind works. So even from the perspective of a human agent (is there any other perspective we can lay claim to?), truth not morality comes first. Allah is \textit{al-Haqq} and this is obviously why He is the most exciting thing around town.

In section 2, we established this priority of truth and reason. And again, Rahman is confused on this point. He observes that it is rational reflection on the universe that leads us to believe in God and that such belief in turn anchors moral behavior.\(^{43}\) God is the ‘transcendental anchoring point of human conduct’. \(^{44}\) So here he seems to think that the order of priority in the Quran is reason, God, and then morality. The Quran first aims at reason not morality.\(^{45}\) But despite this acknowledgment of the priority of reason, Rahman never emerges with a clear statement of the priority of reason over morality. The tension in his writing remains unresolved: ‘It is this mission – the attempt to create a moral social order on earth – which the Qur’an (33:72) describes as the “Trust.”’.\(^{46}\) But, at a basic level, that is not the “Trust” that the Quran is referring to. The “Trust” is a deeper notion – God entrusts us with free will, and with the task of freely choosing to be guided by reason so that reason may discover Truth and banish Falsehood (21:16-8). If we freely choose to be guided by reason we will arrive at the truth of God’s existence and thus attain personal salvation. So this notion of “Trust” has to do with things far more eternally significant than merely establishing a ‘moral social order on earth’. It has to do with establishing Truth, banishing Falsehood, and thus escaping eternal pain and damnation. These are themes of magical and mythical proportions that engulf the universe. The Quran may be read as an ancient supernatural epic but hardly as a book of contemporary meta-ethics primarily concerned with establishing a ‘moral social order on earth’. The establishment of a moral social order would follow as a mere consequence of the
victory of Truth over Falsehood in the impenetrable and unknowable recesses of the human mind.

For the Quran, it is truth and reason that are basic. Our basic commitment is to truth, and reason guides us to believe in the truth of Allah’s existence. Such rational belief results in symbolic submission, and because of this anchors moral behavior. The point is that morality comes into the picture quite late. “Reverence Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights)” (4:1). This summarizes the meta-ethics of the Quran. Belief in Allah allows us to demand mutual rights through Him. So the moral order (of rights) is based on religious belief (in Allah) that is in turn grounded in a rational discovery of truth.

Rahman seems not to come forth in unequivocal support for the priority of reason over morality. In fact, it seems that his purpose is not to establish any such priority. Rational reflection on the universe leads us to think of a Creator, but the real purpose of the Quran in calling for such reflection is so that the Creator can become a ‘transcendental anchoring point for human conduct’. Recall that, for Rahman, there is a tension between God as a strictly functional morality regulator and as a factual being. If the primary aim of the Quran is to maximize moral energy, or in other words, to anchor human conduct, then God would seem simply to be pressed into the service of this aim. Reason and the Creator are in the service of morality and it would appear that morality, not truth, is the highest aim.

In all fairness to Rahman, he is not concerned with the order of priority of truth, reason, God, symbol, and morality, but rather with a holistic view of the thinking that lifts the veil from the human mind and leads to a discovery of God and morality. However, the point here is that failing to give an order of priority leads to unclear and incorrect thinking, especially on the central issue of the observance of Islamic symbols.

5. Morality versus Symbol

Perhaps Rahman’s clearest statement of the priority of morality over symbol is the following one:

The basic élan of the Qur’an – the stress on socioeconomic justice and essential human egalitarianism – is quite clear from its very early passages. Now all that follows by way of Qur’anic legislation in the field of private and public life, even the “five pillars” of Islam that are held to be religion par excellence, has social justice and the building of an egalitarian community as its end.47

For Rahman, morality (social justice, egalitarianism) is first. This would seem to be followed by symbol (e.g. the “five pillars”). Rahman does not, at least in this passage, rate truth or reason but even this priority of morality over symbol is very unsound. From my analysis in Section 2, it is clear that once we believe in Allah there is nothing more to do but observe His symbols. After all, having accepted Allah as the All-knowing giver of unequivocal symbols, we must accept that these symbols are the ones most suitable for us (as the All-knowing knows best). Moreover, I’m sure the point will not be lost on us that Allah gets fairly upset when we fail to observe the symbols (case in point, Satan). So this is a question of personal salvation, of avoiding the flames of Hell. I stand as a believer before Allah, as one of the mu’minun “whose hearts tremble with awe whenever Allah is mentioned” (8:2). Given my belief in the All-
powerful, submission to Him - through observance of His symbols - is immediate. As I stand before Allah, there is an immediacy and inevitability that I feel regarding what I have to do. This is about me as an individual, it is my salvation, and no one else matters. Under these circumstances I think only of obeying Allah and social morality is the last thing on my mind (unless of course Allah’s command is to be friendly with my neighbor).

Another way of understanding the priority of symbol is that as soon as we believe in Allah, we immediately accept that He is free of all wants (al-ghanî) and absolutely independent of us and needs nothing from us (as-samad). It is certainly true that He needs nothing from us in any physical or material way. In other words, we immediately accept that the significance of human actions for Allah is purely symbolic (and not physical or material), and that human beings can submit to Allah only in a symbolic way (see pp. 161-3). Belief is followed immediately by the acknowledgement that we must submit through symbol. Thus, after belief in Allah at number three on the order of priority, symbolic submission follows immediately at number four. Moreover, we will see below that a moral act such as charity that is not motivated by symbolic submission is of no value to Allah, but is rather a hollow moral act. A moral act can only be significant if it indicates symbolic submission. Thus, morality is hollow without symbol.

Lastly, to understand the priority of symbol over morality, imagine that you are the only creature in the universe. In such a possible world, your Creator would demand symbolic submission, not morality (as there is no other creature around). In religion, symbols are logically prior to morals. If you remember, Rahman was not sure what the Quran would tell the only person in the universe to do though it seems obvious that it would tell him, as it does in the many persons universe, to prostrate before Allah. Thus, morals can be number five (after symbols at number four) on the order of priority. Our order of priority reads: truth, reason, Allah, symbol, morals.

As I have shown, symbols are related to symbolic submission and personal salvation, and this gives them priority over morals. Rahman correctly believes that our basic moral problem is to attain the right balance between moral extremes such as hopelessness and pride, feelings of absolute ignorance and absolute knowledge, and in general “negative self-feeling” and a “feeling of omnipotence”. The idea is that there should be a balance of these opposing moral tensions, that we should attain proper self-esteem without violating the balance either in the direction of self-negation or in the direction of self-righteousness. However, because Rahman does not understand the order of priority in the Quran (and specifically the priority of symbols over morals) he fails to see that this moral balance cannot be attained without symbol. For example, what is the Quran’s formula for attaining the balance between hopelessness and pride? The prevention and cure of hopelessness is belief in God as the Merciful Sustainer and Protector. The prevention and cure of pride is also belief in God this time as the All-knowing and All-powerful Master of the universe. But how is this preventive and curative program to be administered?

It is evident that hollow acts of morality are not the right program of prevention and cure. Feelings of despair and pride can occur multiple times a day and it would only be a superficial cure to go into society and engage in some moral act such as charity. After all, our charitable act could go to our head and make us even more proud. Or we might see that the charity is not enough for everyone in need and despair even further. Morality (in the sense of hollow moral
acts) is hardly the right mental health program for the extreme feelings of hopelessness and pride. In this scenario, morality as balance of feeling is an end we desire, but we cannot use morality (hollow moral acts) to get to morality (balance of feeling). Rahman’s definition of morality (as balance of feeling) can only be attained if the right program is administered.

It is symbol that gives us the right mental health program. It is, after all, a mental health program and requires us to think in the right way. My belief in Allah and observance of His symbols can create the balance of feeling I am looking for. When I prostrate before Him (in symbolic submission) I am changing the way I think and feel. I am acknowledging that He is the master and I am the slave (so much for pride). I am letting go of my urge to control everything and acknowledging the limited domain of my responsibility and the boundless domain of His (so much for hopelessness). Before I engage in any moral act such as going into society and performing an act of charity, I must engage in symbolic submission in order to get myself into the right frame of mind. I think to myself that I am doing this as a token contribution to the cause of Allah (as I can only contribute in a symbolic way to His cause). As a result, this moral act does not puff me up with pride (because I have done so much) and neither does it drive me to despair (because I haven’t done enough). Any moral act devoid of symbolic submission is hollow and fails to attain the true morality of balance of feeling. Whither morality as balance of feeling without symbolic submission? The value of an act such as charity is first and foremost as observance of a divine symbol and only after that as a moral gesture towards a needy human being.

Furthermore, the best way to attain balance of feeling is through purely symbolic action such as offering one’s prayers when no one is looking. This is an act that we can be sure is done purely in submission to Allah because no other motives are available to confuse the motive of submission. As there is no one looking, we are not offering prayers to make an impression on anyone. As the ritual (of offering this particular prayer) seems to be quite useless from a physical and economic viewpoint, our material well-being is not a motive either. In offering prayers when no one is around, we are doing the most we can in attaining balance of feeling, because our motive is purely to declare to ourselves that Allah exists and there is no reason that we should despair or be proud. In symbolic submission we deeply imbibe the moral balance. Thus, symbolic submission is far more important for mental health than moral action which is by nature social, and in which it is much harder to attain pure submission as motive.

It is because reason gives us belief in an All-knowing and All-powerful being for Whom the significance of human actions is merely symbolic, that we learn to appreciate the importance of symbols in Islam. As Rahman is unclear on this priority of reason, he values an act such as charity as morally good, while failing to fully appreciate its deeper value as observance of a divine symbol. This becomes a serious problem, as I will later show, when he considers an apparently non-moral symbol such as ribā (interest). For Rahman, charity has value because it is morally good, but what value could an apparently non-moral symbol such as ribā have? If its moral value is not apparent then it would appear to be a socially useless symbol. But the social utility of ribā is not to the point. Reason tells us to respect it as a divine symbol regardless of its social utility. Operating without this last insight Rahman plays fast and loose with symbols that apparently lack social utility.
6. Reading God’s Mind

What is most conspicuous about Rahman’s hermeneutics is his claim that he is able to comfortably understand the meanings God intends in the Quran. The source of this comfort seems to be the moral law. The moral law was officially discovered in the West by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) during the Enlightenment and this discovery by an ordinary person devoid of prophetic consciousness suggests, and Kant did say this, that the moral law is part and parcel of ordinary human experience. Rahman’s co-opting of the moral law and declaring it to be a part of God does not remove it from the realm of ordinary human experience. The Prophet’s consciousness rose to become one with the moral law, but an ordinary consciousness such as Kant’s or Rahman’s can still be intimately aware of the law, or so it would seem. Rahman’s positing of the moral law suggests that people with ordinary moral perception have some access to the source of the Prophet’s inspiration. This is probably the reason that he feels so confident that he can know the meanings God intends in the Quran.

My own view is that since there is no reason to posit the moral law as a metaphysical reality in addition to the reality of God, I think it is not possible to gain any sure knowledge of God’s intended meanings. This was explained in Chapter 1 where the natural epistemological limit in understanding the life and mind of God was outlined as a basic hermeneutical principle. As a rational Muslim theist, Rahman ought to bear in mind that epistemic limits play the critical role in arriving at belief in God in the first place (they cause us to fall back to deep psychology), and that such limits have to be respected in hermeneutics as well. The question of God’s existence fully engages the human mind, and it is not possible to give a positive answer to that question and blithely move on to the next question of what it is that God is thinking. This is because our whole lives are spent struggling with the first existential question and we never really emerge from that struggle in order to have the mental freedom (or divert the mental resources) to determine what God is thinking. In contrast to this, Rahman seems to say that he is certain what God is thinking and this assumes that he is also certain that God exists. This is not good philosophical method. A rational theist ought to bear in mind that he cannot be certain that God exists and merely rationally believes that He does on the basis of deep psychological principles. If one cannot even be certain that God exists then how can one be certain what He is thinking. Any theory about what God is thinking would have to be based on the same psychological principles that give us the rational belief that He exists for otherwise ideas of what He is thinking would be unjustifiably disconnected from reasons for His existence. Thus, as rational theists, our views on what God is thinking should not be based on the moral law but on the deep psychology of sufficient reason, simplicity and trust. A hermeneutics based on these principles was outlined in Chapter 1: Section 5.

Rahman does not share such compunctions concerning the limits of knowledge. He cites with approval the view of the ‘objectivity school’ in modern hermeneutical theory that insists that ‘one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study’. As our object of study is the Quran, to be true to the ‘objectivity school’, we would have to ascertain the meaning intended by the mind of God. Rather than express any qualms about our ability to understand God’s intended meanings, Rahman further qualifies the method of the ‘objectivity school’ by essentially saying that the meanings God intended to convey in the Quran cannot simply be known through His mind, but must also be known.
through an analysis of the situation to which He is responding. This is the only sense I can make of the following passage.

In modern hermeneutical theory, the “objectivity school” has insisted that one must first of all ascertain the meaning intended by the mind that authored the object of study. According to E. Betti, a contemporary representative of this school, the process of understanding is a “reversal” of the original creative process: the forms that we try to understand and interpret now are to be led back to the creative mind whose original contents they were, not as isolated items but as a coherent whole, and made to live again in the mind of the understanding subject. It should be pointed out, however, that this unity of forms cannot be attributed simply to the mind; one must also consider the situation to which it is a response. This, of course, admits of varying degrees, but certainly, in the case of the Qur’an, the objective situation is a sine qua non for understanding, particularly since, in view of its absolute normativity for Muslims, it is literally God’s response through Muhammad’s mind (this latter factor has been radically underplayed by the Islamic orthodoxy) to a historic situation (a factor likewise drastically restricted by the Islamic orthodoxy in a real understanding of the Qur’an).

What is clear in this passage is that the Quran is God’s response to the situation developing on the ground in 7th century Mecca and Medina, and that this response is given through Muhammad’s mind. The precise mechanism would seem to be the one we have already discussed. Muhammad’s consciousness became identical to the moral law (and this is a part of God), and with that general law in hand Muhammad made context specific applications of it to the situation on the ground. In other words, Muhammad was able (through his mind) to touch base with God (specifically the part of God that is the moral law) and then make specific applications of general divine moral principles to 7th century Arab society. Rahman points out that it is critical to objectively understand the situation on the ground (‘objective situation is a sine qua non for understanding’) in order to make sense of the specific applications of the moral law. If we do not know the historical situation we will not understand what general moral principle was being applied. For example, it is only because we know that slavery and polygamy were so entrenched in pre-Islamic Arab society that we can see Muhammad’s regulation (rather than abolition) of these institutions as an application of the universal moral principles of freedom and egalitarianism. Abolishing these institutions would have resulted in social disruption and so Muhammad applied the principles of freedom and egalitarianism while being sensitive to his context, and he did this by preparing the stage for the gradual demise of these institutions rather than demanding immediate and sudden abolition.

Thus, to understand the meanings God intended in the Quran, it is necessary to have a firm grasp on the history of the time and place of revelation. We should be on board with the basic agenda of gaining a historical understanding of the context of revelation in order to understand the import of revealed moral principles, but the one thing that escapes me is the goal, which is apparently to understand God’s intended meanings. According to Rahman, the ‘objectivity school’ that he cites with approval wants to know the meanings intended by the original author (God), and Rahman is fine with that, his only concern being that these meanings can only be properly grasped with an understanding of the situation that the author is responding to. I would, of course, choose to disembark at this point. Given everything that
the Quran has told us about God, we should be wary of any project aimed at understanding God’s intended meanings. For example, this is a being that has made the decision to burn some people in Hell forever. From a human perspective, that appears to be nothing less (and a whole lot more) than inordinately extreme psychosis. Try as we may, we cannot understand that decision of His. This is just one admittedly non-random instance where we fail to understand God’s intended meaning. As far as God’s intended meanings are concerned, we are once again face to face with our metaphysical deafness and blindness. All we can do is return to the universe of trust and the words of Allah. This is precisely the reason that we hold the text of the Quran so dear. It is our guide through the silence and darkness.

Rahman feels that we can have access to the moral law and thus to God’s intended meanings. The moral law is an objective law, and combined with an objective understanding of the situational context of its application, he feels confident that we can objectively know the universal moral principles Muhammad sought to apply in Mecca and Medina. For example, the regulations on slavery and polygamy were an application of the principles of freedom and egalitarianism respectively. These are the reasons that Rahman is so confident that Islam aims at monogamous, slave-free societies. He can read the mind of God and God wants monogamy and the abolition of slavery. On more than one occasion Rahman articulates the basic principle ‘there is one God and one humanity’ capturing both the ideas of universal freedom and egalitarianism. But all this emphasis on freedom and egalitarianism is suspiciously close to Western liberalism and one feels either that Western liberalism has rediscovered Islamic ethics or that Rahman was unable to break free of the influence of Western liberalism when he was constructing his hermeneutics.

Of course it is the latter possibility that I am inclined to entertain because of a natural skepticism that Western liberalism could ever discover Islamic ethics. So I am inclined to charge Rahman with interpreting under the influence (of liberalism) and attributing Western liberal morality to God. Does God want egalitarianism, the social equality of all human beings? There is no basis for thinking this. Inequality is woven into the very fabric of social existence. Some people are healthy, others sick. Some are strong, others weak or disabled. Some are beautiful, others plain. Some are intelligent, others dull. Some are rich, others poor. Not only is inequality a permanent social reality, it is also an eternal reality. Allah eternally institutionalizes inequality by sending some people to Heaven and others to Hell. And even within Heaven and Hell there are ranks. So there is no obvious connection between the concepts of one God and of blind human equality. On the contrary, it seems that inequality is the very basis upon which people are tested. Allah gives some people power over others in various situations and this becomes a test of their rationality and goodness. For example, it is a test for the master to treat his slave with compassion, and it is a test because of the temporal power he has over him. Kings, rulers, husbands, bosses and in other ways politicians, lawyers, and doctors, are all tested because of the power they have over others to do harm or good. Even human power over animals and the natural environment is something for which we are to be held accountable. Thus, inequality is a necessary and permanent feature of the Islamic social and natural universe, and egalitarianism is far from being an obvious aim of the Quran.

The same goes for universal human freedom that is a value of Western liberalism but not an obvious aim of the Quran. The basic ethical point of the Quran is that we should treat others with compassion wherever and in whatever situation we find them. We should not mistreat
people. This means we should not mistreat our slaves, wives, employees, children, clients etc. As long as a human being is free to believe in the oneness of God and practice faith they have all the freedom they need to attain a place in Heaven. At a basic level, the Quran is only concerned that slaves should have the mental-physical freedom they need to believe in God and practice faith. It is by no means necessary that they should also have the freedom to live an independent life on earth. Many believers are disabled or paralyzed but this is not seen to get in the way of their faith (au contraire, it may strengthen their faith). Beyond such loss of freedom to disability and disease, to my knowledge no words in the Quran express compunctions at the loss of freedom of one human being to another. All loss of freedom seems to fall under the general rubric of the loss of freedom to the circumstances of life. This is an immutable feature of the human condition and it is faced both by slave and freeman. The free believer is of course also a slave (to God) and must offer prayers at the stated times, fast and so on. He must always act on what he believes to be the Divine command. As his faith becomes stronger his degrees of freedom become less – the more the faith the less the freedom. The point is that there is a continuum in the loss of freedom.

So freedom is relative. Of course, a free believer has relatively more freedom than a believing slave. But where the slave has less social freedom he also has less social responsibility. His life is immensely simple on that account, as he is accountable for a whole lot less. He is acting on the command of his master and it is the master who is accountable to society and to God. So freedom and responsibility are not absolutes. They are relative. Some people are born into circumstances of less freedom, or lose freedom as they journey through life. But the basic thing the Quran concerns itself with is whether they have the minimal freedom to believe in God and practice faith. If a slave has a compassionate human master then of course he has that minimal freedom. He may be doing more chores and tasks in addition to offering his prayers but that is not to the point. He has all the freedom he needs to make the only choice God really wants him to make. It would be a textually baseless assumption to say that the Quran is concerned for the freedom of a believing slave who is mentally resigned to his earthly condition and who has a compassionate human master. Why would the Quran want such a slave to be free when he is going straight to Heaven in his present condition? The Quran does not set the goal of earthly freedom for such a slave because earthly freedom is only a means to an end in some but not all cases. In cases where the end (Heaven) can be attained without the means (earthly freedom) the Quran would dispense with the means. After all, the alleged means could also possibly become an obstacle to attaining the end. Of course, if freedom leads to a wholesome life and thus stronger faith then freedom is a Quranic goal, and because it is commonly true that free people are happy people, the Quran sees the liberating of slaves as a good deed. But when the Quran says that every slave worthy of freedom should have the opportunity to earn this freedom, what is at work is not the principle of universal freedom but rather the principle of justice, apparently because it would be an injustice to enslave a human being who has the will and ability to live an independent life. Thus individual temperament and ability are important considerations. It may be okay and feasible to fence cows but not cats. This principle of justice based on individual temperament and ability should not and cannot be mistaken for a principle of universal freedom because the implication is that not all slaves are uniformly worthy of freedom (because of temperament, skill, age, health etc.). There is no indication in the Quran that freedom must be universal (or absolute). All freedom is by nature limited and relative being possessed in different degrees by different individuals.
The insistence on universal freedom is a value of Western liberalism. The Quran is not concerned with the attainment of a superficial universal freedom that is also compatible with a lack of compassion in society. The fact is that the Western principle of universal freedom has taken the focus away from a genuine solution to the problems of humanity – the only genuine solution being the cultivation of the human virtues such as justice and compassion. We have seen this reality unfold in Western societies where people are often seen saying to each other and to others ‘you have your freedom and your rights, if you’ve still got issues don’t look to me’. By contrast, the Quran is concerned with the only genuine solution and that is to cultivate a culture of human virtue. It would be difficult to cultivate the virtues if everyone were declared equal and free because naturally people would then feel less responsible for each other. What the Quran is saying is that we are all in need of each other and always will be. The helplessness of a child or servant is the natural condition that awakens the best of human emotion. Life is unpredictable and there are accidents, natural disasters, wars, social and economic crises and so on. What will stand us in good stead through all this is human virtue. A formal bill of rights could be the product of a culture of virtue but it is really the culture of virtue that is the foundation. An elephant of human suffering could pass through (and often has passed through) the gaping holes in a bill of rights that has no secure foundation in a virtuous culture. Only virtue fills the gaps in the law and the cracks in the system. There will always be inequality and only virtue heals it. Universal freedom will not end inequality and suffering. An abolition of slavery may be compatible with the Quran but may not be to the point and should certainly not distract us from the real goal. The real goal is the cultivation of human virtue.

I have articulated the view that the Quran focuses on the virtues of justice and compassion and there is no textual basis for saying that it is concerned with the principles of egalitarianism and universal freedom. This difference of opinion with Rahman is also my reason for being skeptical of his awareness of some moral law. My point is that if he is aware of it then why am I not also aware of it. If I were aware of it then I would also see egalitarianism and universal freedom as universal moral principles in the way that he does. However, because I am not aware of those principles, and because my literalist reading of the Quran does not give me those principles, I espouse only the virtues that are literally mentioned in the Quran.

The only absolutist principle of the Quran is that of upholding truth. The corresponding virtues are self-honesty and honesty. When people have these virtues the principle is upheld. It is also upheld when people have the virtues of justice and compassion. If a sense of justice and a compassionate personality allow a master to give his slave the freedom to understand religion then it is human virtue (justice and compassion) that upholds truth. The virtues are in the service of truth. On the contrary, the principles of egalitarianism and universal freedom may fail to serve the cause of truth if they go against justice and compassion. If a woman is considered equal to a man and given the same responsibilities and burdens then there is the possibility that this would be unjust and uncompassionate. What we realize is that in the final analysis the question is one of justice and compassion rather than equality. If justice and compassion demand social equality for women then so be it. If not, then not. The point is that it is the virtues (of justice and compassion) that pass judgment on the principles of egalitarianism and universal freedom, not the other way around. Societies characterized by justice and compassion unleash the creative potential of human beings to pursue science,
philosophy, and religion. It is virtuous societies that are most conducive to the pursuit of truth. Human virtue is the safe keeper of truth.

7. The Case of Ribā

In the way that the regulations on slavery and polygamy are seen to be applications of universal principles of freedom and egalitarianism, the regulation on ribā (interest) is seen to be an application of the universal principle of socioeconomic justice. Rahman makes the case that the ban on ribā applies to usury, profiteering and a purely competitive attitude and that it does not apply to simple interest because it would make no sense to ban simple interest as it does not violate socioeconomic justice. I will consider this interpretation in detail, arguing that there is no linguistic or historical basis for it.

The root of ribā is r-b-w and as used in the Quran it has the meanings ‘to grow (22:5), to increase (30:39; 2:276), to rise (23:50), to swell (13:17), to nurture or raise (26:18), and to augment or surpass (69:10; 16:92).” A meaning of r-b-w common to these uses would be ‘going beyond a previous state or a process through which something goes beyond what it was’. To understand the Quranic ban on ribā we must turn to three places in the Quran (2:275-80; 3:130; 30:39). These revelations are given below in chronological order. Wherever the root r-b-w is used I have indicated in parenthesis.

I. Verse 30:39: And whatever you give by way of ribā (r-b-w) so that it may increase (r-b-w) upon peoples’ wealth, increases (r-b-w) not with God; but what you give by way of zakah seeking the pleasure of God, those – they receive recompense manifold.

II. Verse 3:130: O you who believe, do not consume ribā (r-b-w) with continued redoubling and protect yourselves from God, perchance you may prosper.

III. Verses 275-80: (275) Those who consume ribā (r-b-w) shall not stand except like the one who has been struck by the Devil’s touch. This is because they say that trade is like ribā (r-b-w), whereas God has made trade lawful and has forbidden ribā (r-b-w). Whosoever receives an admonition from his Lord and desists, he shall have his past gains, and his affair is committed to God; but whosoever reverts – those are the inhabitants of the Fire, therein dwelling forever. (276) God destroys ribā (r-b-w) but gives increase (r-b-w) to alms. God loves not any sinning disbeliever. (277) [But] those who believe and do deeds of righteousness, and perform the prayer; and pay the alms – their reward awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they grieve. (278) O ye who believe! Protect yourselves from God and remit what is left of ribā (r-b-w) if ye be faithful. (279) If ye do it not, be prepared for war from God and His Prophet; but if ye desist, ye shall receive back your capital wealth so that you neither commit nor suffer an injustice. (280) If, however, anyone is in difficulties, let there be a delay till he is able to pay, although it is better for ye to remit if ye only knew.”

From the use of the root r-b-w in these verses we can see that in the directly relevant context of the ban on ribā the root r-b-w specifically means ‘to increase’. Thus, on the basis of linguistic and semantic analysis in the context we are focusing on, ribā is an increase. What is ribā an increase in? Is it an increase on a loan (interest), an exorbitant increase on a loan (usury), a
simple increase on business investment (profit), or an increase that we gain through profiteering (selling goods and services at unfair prices)? In the verses above, the Quran is unequivocal in saying that *ribâ* is an increase on a loan. The obvious textual basis for this claim is that in the chronologically latest verses (2:275-80), in 2:279 to be precise, those who repent are told that they will have their capital wealth returned to them so that they ‘neither commit nor suffer an injustice’. Capital wealth, of course, is returned to lenders and not to traders (for whom the process of reversing the transaction would be different, specifically, they would return the money or commodities used to purchase the goods they had sold and these goods would be returned to them). In any case, verse 2:275 contrasts *ribâ* and trade and so traders are not being addressed. Nor can we make sense of this verse by saying that the capital wealth is being returned to equity investors as opposed to lenders, because equity investors make profit on capital and the word for profit is *munâfâ* not *ribâ* (remember 2:278 is demanding the remitting of *ribâ*), and we know independently that profit is legal in Islam so that there is no question of depriving the equity investor of his profit. Nor does it make good sense to say that *ribâ* refers to exorbitant profit from profiteering because in that case what should properly be returned to the equity investor is his capital wealth *plus the fair profit* so that he receives his past gains according to the promise in 2:275 (‘Whosoever... desists, he shall have his past gains’; note that any fair profit made until the time of revelation of the verses should qualify as a past gain) and so that in accord with 2:279 he suffers no injustice (‘so that you neither commit nor suffer an injustice’). For the same reason, it does not make sense to say that *ribâ* refers to an exorbitant increase on a loan (usury) because in that case what should properly be returned to the usurious lender is his capital *plus the fair interest* so that ‘he shall have his past gains’ and ‘neither commits nor suffers an injustice’. God has made a promise and invoked the principle of justice and we do have to hold Him to these principles. In any case, the last verse (2:280) refers to someone being in difficulty and not being able to pay, and this is a natural and obvious reference to a borrower who is unable to repay his loan. An equity investor would expect payment only if the business was profitable or was at least not experiencing ‘difficulty’ while if the verse is addressing a profiteering trader then it is his responsibility to refund the customer of his commodities the amount that was overcharged and there is no question of his customer having any ‘difficulty’ (because the customer does not have to repay or return anything).

In 2:279, capital wealth is referred to by the phrase *ru‘usu amwâlikum*. The word *ru‘usu* is plural for *ra‘as* which means head. The word *amwâlikum* means ‘your properties’ or ‘your moneys’. The phrase literally means the ‘heads of your properties or moneys’. The word *ra‘as* is used in other places in Arabic to metaphorically mean the heart or core of something. For example, in part of a Prophetic tradition ‘*tawheeda ra‘as uth-tha’ath*’ means that faith in one God (*tawheed*) is the head (*ra‘as*), heart, or core of obedience (*tha’ath*). In other words, there is no point in obedience that does not have faith at its heart or core. So in 2:279 those who repent can have the head, heart, or core of their properties or moneys. As a result, the phrase *ru‘usu amwâlikum* is universally taken to mean capital wealth.

Further textual evidence that *ribâ* refers to increase on a loan comes from the contrast in 2:275-6 of *ribâ* to *bay‘* (trade) and *sadaqâh* (giving for the sake of God). First, let me establish the meaning of *bay‘*. According to Lane’s lexicon ‘the primary signification of *bay‘* is the exchanging, or exchange, of property; or the making of an exchange with property, as in the phrases *bay‘* *rabe‘* (an exchange of property bringing gain) and *bay‘* *khasir* (an exchange of
property occasioning loss): and this is a proper signification when it relates to real substances but it is tropically used to signify making the contract (of sale and purchase); because this is the means of giving (and obtaining) possession.\footnote{57} Thus, the ‘primary signification’ of bay’ is exchange. We can now reason our way to the meaning of ribā as follows. What is the practice that may be contrasted with bay’ (exchange) and at the same time contrasted with sadaqāh (giving for the sake of God)? There is a natural and obvious contrast between exchanging something for something else and giving something with no exchange involved. So exchange may be naturally contrasted with giving. As ribā is contrasted to exchange (bay’) in 2:275, ribā must be a form of giving and not a form of exchange. But what kind of giving is it? In 2:276, ribā is contrasted to giving for the sake of God (sadaqāh). So ribā is giving, but it is not giving for the sake of God or to seek recompense from God. Thus, ribā is giving for the sake of earthly recompense or profit. It is giving for profit or in other words lending for profit. It is lending (or credit) at a price or at interest.

The earliest verse (30:39) indicates that ribā is generated on the basis of something we give (ateetum min ribā, root a-t-y means ‘to give’ as used in 5:60; 27:23; 59:7) and the verse indicates that the giving is in some way similar to the way that we give zakāh (ateetum min zakāh). However, the verse aims to draw a contrast between ribā and zakāh, and what we give in the practice of ribā may have an increase in earthly wealth but no increase with God, while what we give in the practice of zakāh receives manifold recompense from God. We see the same contrast in 2:276: ‘God destroys ribā but gives increase to sadaqāh’. The contrast is made all the more stark in the following verses: ‘Who is it that will offer to Allah a beautiful loan (qard hasanā), so that He multiplies it to him manifold’ (2:245); ‘Who is he that will offer to Allah a beautiful loan (qard hasanā), so that He will double it for him, and such a one will have a generous reward’ (57:11); ‘If you offer to Allah a beautiful loan (qard hasanā) He will double it for you and forgive you’ (64:17). Thus, (voluntary) giving for the sake of God, in other words sadaqāh, is spoken of as a beautiful loan (qard hasanā) to Allah, and I am sure we will not miss the contrast with giving or lending not for the sake of God’s approval but for worldly gain, the implication being that this latter giving or lending is far from beautiful. The contrast being driven home is that the motivation for giving is worlds apart: sadaqāh is for Allah while ribā is for the world. Both involve giving, but with opposite motives. It is critical to note that voluntary giving with no profit motive (sadaqāh) has a natural contrast in voluntary giving with a profit motive (credit with interest) but may not be naturally contrasted to voluntary giving with the motive of making an exorbitant profit (usury). The opposite of short is tall, not very tall. The opposite of giving with no profit is giving with profit, not giving with exorbitant profit. Sadaqāh is any giving for the sake of God where earthly profit is not a motive. It may be naturally contrasted to any giving where profit is a motive, even if it is only a little bit of profit (interest). There is no good sense in saying that its natural contrast is giving with the motive of only exorbitant profit.

This linguistic and semantic analysis is further reinforced by an analysis of the chronological order of revelation. The first verse to be revealed was 30:39, as it is a part of Surah al-Rum that is a wholly Meccan revelation. Surah al-Rum refers to the Persians defeating the Romans, a development that began in 611A.D and culminated in the fall of Constantinople in 614 A.D., and so the verse in question would have been revealed in those years.\footnote{58} The second verse to be revealed was 3:130 and this is a part of the Medinese Surah Al-‘Imran and is dated by the fact that it is embedded in a discussion of the Battle of Uhud (624-5 A.D/3 A.H). The third
revelation was a group of verses (2:275-80) that appear to have been revealed a few years later certainly after the banning of alcohol (625-6 A.D/4 A.H) and before the Last or Farewell Pilgrimage of the Prophet (631 A.D/9 A.H). Now a literal reading of the second verse (3:130) shows that it is banning usury while a literal reading of the last verses (2:275-80) show that they are banning interest. From a believer’s point of view there is no question that these verses are banning different things (ban on usury followed by ban on interest). This is because if the second verse banned usury in 3 A.H and then the last verses banned usury again more than a year later this time with a dire threat, all of this would reflect quite poorly on the Companions of the Prophet. Was their belief in God so half-baked that the initial ban was not enough to elicit compliance? Why was there any need for another ban on the same thing (usury) this time with a dire threat? The last verses (2:275-80) clearly show that some form of ribā was still being practiced. Were the Companions simply not complying? This goes against everything we know about them. As I said, from a believer’s viewpoint, it is untenable to say that the second verse and the last verses are banning the same thing, namely, usury. The only sense that can be made of this is that the second verse (3:130) bans usury (‘ribā with continued redoubling’) while the last verses (2:275-80) ban interest (‘remit what is left of ribā’) because lending on simple interest was still permitted and still being practiced. As the parentheses in the last sentence indicate, there is linguistic support for this conclusion because the second verse (3:130) refers to ‘ribā with continued redoubling’ while the last verses (2:275-80) refer to ‘what is left of ribā’, that is, any increase at all that is being applied in lending contracts is banned.

Rahman, as believer, is in agreement with the principle that non-compliance would reflect seriously on the character of the Companions. He differs with me in thinking that how seriously it reflects on their character depends on the length of the period of non-compliance. Rahman is arguing against the case made by many Muslim scholars that the last verses (2:275-80) were also the very last verses of the Quran and were revealed just before the Prophet’s death (632 A.D/10 A.H) so that the time distance between the second verse (3:130) and the last verses (2:275-80) could be 6 or more years. Rahman points out that for the Companions to be in a state of non-compliance for that long is untenable:

As mentioned above, the gradual prohibition of riba started during the early days of the Meccan period. That, in spite of these early revelations, the Companions of the Prophet continued to take riba until a few days before the death of the Prophet when Allah had to threaten them with war from Himself and His Prophet, would be a serious reflection on their character.59

Rahman sees a distance of 6 years between the second (3:130) and the last verses (2:275-80) as untenable because his view is that God is banning the very same thing (usury) in both these instances of revelation. That God has to ban the same thing again with a dire threat 6 years later is untenable. So he argues that the distance is not 6 years but only a year or two and that the ban on usury is repeated in the last verses (2:275-80) within a year or two of its initial occurrence in 3:130. The only credible evidence that Rahman brings to bear on this discussion shows that the last verses (2:275-80) were revealed after the banning of alcohol in 4 A.H and before the Last Pilgrimage in 9 A.H. So it would seem that the last verses (2:275-80) were revealed more than a year after the second verse (3:130). Thus, for Rahman, a year or two of non-compliance does not reflect in a serious enough way on the character of the Companions

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so as to be problematic. It is critical to observe that the initial ban on ribā in the second verse (3:130) is embedded in a discussion of the reverse that the Muslims had just suffered during the Battle of Uhud. This reverse had been the result of non-compliance of the Prophet’s explicit orders by a small group of archers who had left their post during the battle in pursuit of booty. Thus, non-compliance was a focal point of the Quran’s discussion when the initial ban on ribā was revealed. To argue that this ban was then followed by collective and systematic non-compliance for one or two years portrays the Companions as either faithless or obtuse. History disallows either portrayal. A common sense view is that a group of people such as the Companions who were locked in a grim struggle for survival in Arabia on the basis of their faith could not have engaged in collective and systematic non-compliance of God’s law even for a day let alone a whole year. There is no evidence of non-compliance on any other issue such as alcohol or polygamy. Any incidents of adultery are individual and isolated. Nor to my knowledge is there any record of any serious incident of individual non-compliance on the issue of ribā. So I think that the theory that there was non-compliance for a year or two that resulted in another ban on usury and an ultimatum from God in the last verses (2:275-80) is untenable. Rather, usury was banned and there was full compliance. A few years later interest was also banned.

In the passage quoted above, Rahman mentions that ‘the gradual prohibition of riba started during the early days of the Meccan period’ (italics added). A principle of gradualism that holds that the Quran has a historicist’s awareness and introduces restrictions only gradually and in keeping with the readiness of its recipient society is central to Rahman’s hermeneutics.

Like alcohol, riba was deeply ingrained in the life-texture of the Arabs of pre-Islamic days. Indeed, commercially speaking, it was much more deeply laid than alcohol. It meant a lucrative business which brought quick and plentiful return to the usurer. That is why, while its prohibition, like that of liquor, was introduced gradually, its denunciation was much more severe.60

Thus, Rahman is of the view that both alcohol and ribā were banned gradually. The passage above argues for the Law of Graduation used by the Muslim jurists and that Rahman also uses and approves of ‘which means that at least in certain cases the Qur’an, in order to wean the Muslims from certain habits that were deeply ingrained in them before Islam, used graduation rather than sudden abrogation as a principle.’61

According to the Law of Graduation, in the context of the ban on alcohol, the Quran first disapproved of alcohol, then restricted it, and finally banned it in the following verses given in chronological order.

I. Verse 2:219: These people keep asking about alcohol and games of chance; tell them that there is a great deal of harm in them but there are also certain profits for people in them; but their harm (or sin) outweighs their benefits.

II. Verse 4:43: Do not approach prayers when you are under the influence of alcohol so that you should know what you are saying.

III. Verses 5:90-1: Alcohol, games of chance, divining by arrows and idol-altars are an abomination and work of the devil. The devil wants to sow discord and rancour among
you and that you should become oblivious of your duty of praying to God. Therefore desist from alcohol. Are you then going to desist?

The second verse (4:43) restricts the use of alcohol while the last verses (5:90-1) ban it completely. Rahman:

One might say that the Qur’an’s passing of strictures on the consumption of alcohol rather than banning it forthwith in the early two Medinan verses on the subject, observed the Law of Graduation rather than immediately and totally banning alcohol, which was done as a last resort.\(^{62}\)

The case of ribā is, of course, parallel to this (as Rahman also observed). The second ribā verse (3:130) seems to restrict its use to non-usurious lending while the last ribā verses (2:275-80) seem to ban all forms of ribā including interest. Following the Law of Graduation, Rahman should have arrived at precisely this conclusion concerning the case of ribā. But on the contrary, Rahman seems to simply and inexplicably abandon the Law of Graduation in the case of ribā. Discussing the three instances of revelation banning ribā he says:

The verse of Surah Al-‘Imran [3:130] categorically prohibiting riba occupies the central place in this series of Qur’anic verses; that of Surah al-Rum [30:39] was its prologue, while those of Surah al-Baqarah [2:275-80] were its epilogue.\(^{63}\)

Thus Rahman abandons the Law of Graduation for his new prologue, main thesis, and epilogue model of the above passage. The second verse (3:130) banning ‘ribā with continued redoubling’ is the main thesis while the other two instances of revelation are prologue (30:39) and epilogue (2:275-80). With the second verse (3:130) occupying the central hermeneutic position, Rahman sees the Quran as banning ‘ribā with continued redoubling’, that is, the ban is only on usury. He gives no reason for his sudden abandonment of the Law of Graduation and also fails to give any adequate basis for making the assumption that the second verse (3:130) ‘has the central place in this series of Qur’anic verses.’ He writes:

As mentioned above, the verse of Surah Al-‘Imran [3:130] occupies the central and fundamental position in the series of verses relating to riba. In this verse the Shari’ah value, i.e., what the Muslim jurists call “the ‘illat al-hukm’” underlying the banning of riba, is explicitly mentioned to be its becoming doubled and redoubled. This contention of ours is supported by the following two famous commentators of the second generation of Islam.\(^{64}\)

8. General Criticisms

This analysis of ribā reveals serious errors in Rahman’s general hermeneutics. The general hermeneutic strategy that Rahman offers is as follows. The injunctions of the Quran were a response to the situation unfolding on the ground in 7th century Arabia. We need to return to that time in order to understand the objective context for these injunctions, so that we can understand what essential or enduring moral principles the Quran was aiming to establish. Having understood the enduring moral principles (as we saw earlier, some independent access to the objective moral law is assumed in arriving at these principles) of the Quran, we can then return to our times, and with an understanding of our social environment, we should struggle
to apply those enduring principles (ancient wisdom) to our lives. Again, using *ribā* as an example, the Quran literally bans interest but what was it aiming to achieve by this? Rahman’s answer would be that the Quran was aiming at socio-economic justice. In Quranic times, interest was uncontrolled and a tool for exploitation. So the Quran bans interest because of its over-arching aim of socio-economic justice. With the enduring principle of socio-economic justice in hand, Rahman returns to modern times and realizes that ‘today’s commercial banking – with an overall controlled economy’ does not undermine socio-economic justice, and so need not come under the Quranic prohibition on *ribā*.

Perhaps the most serious problem here is that despite his aim to attain objectivity, Rahman introduces relativism into Quranic hermeneutics. Rahman claims that when he returns to Quranic times, he can in principle arrive at an objective understanding of the meaning of the texts, and thus the enduring principles he discovers could be the ones intended by God. He believes that the ‘meaning of a past text or precedent... can be sufficiently objectively known’ and that the ‘objective ascertaining of the past... is possible in principle provided requisite evidence is available’. Rahman points out that ‘fundamentalists and modernists have come up with radically different answers to some basic issues according to their respective environments, but neither has had a clear enough method of interpreting the Qur’an and Sunnah.’ He believes that the difference between him and these past interpreters is that his method is clear. But Rahman’s method is anything but clear and he also joins the club of interpreters who ‘come up with radically different answers to some basic issues according to their respective environments’. Following his arrival in Quranic times, Rahman discovers enduring principles in the texts and then declares them to be objective. Now precisely what is it that stops a fundamentalist, modernist, or any other person from arriving in Quranic times, and discovering quite different enduring principles that they then declare to be objective. Because the name of the game is to discover enduring principles that are in God’s mind, each interpreter can discover his favorite principles and claim that these are the ones God intends. Why does Rahman feel that this is a clear method? Is this not precisely what has gone on for most of Muslim history, various people claiming to have understood what God intends. Rahman may attempt to answer this criticism with his oft-repeated view that the enduring principles we arrive at must be in harmony with all else in the Islamic texts. We cannot simply choose our favorite principles because the Islamic texts considered as a whole place constraints on the principles we can choose. But this is hardly a major hurdle in choosing ones favorite principles. All it means is that an interpreter has to make sure that the principles he discovers in one place in the texts are not contradicted in another. He basically has to offer an overall interpretation of the Islamic texts that is consistent with his favorite principles. Of course this is precisely what Rahman himself has done. He has offered an entire moral hermeneutic in order to arrive at his favorite principle of socio-economic justice from the specific injunction against *ribā*.

Rahman offers his hermeneutical strategy because he believes not only that it is possible to objectively know the meaning of the past texts, but also to objectively know the solutions to present problems: “... the meaning of a past text or precedent, the present situation, and the intervening tradition can be sufficiently objectively known...” (italics added). This is why he feels we can return from Quranic times with such general principles as socio-economic justice and modesty and successfully apply them to contemporary society. Here again he is very much the optimist and quite insensitive to the limitations of knowledge in discovering solutions to
elusive social problems. The social sciences and humanities are not at all like the natural sciences in terms of the degree of objectivity that is possible. So Rahman’s hermeneutical strategy depends on an unrealistic view of the objectivity attainable especially in the social sciences.

Let me end this chapter by placing its findings within the context of the discussion in Chapter 1: Section 5. That section argued for a Betti/Hirsch style hermeneutics that is in relative harmony with principles of rational psychology. It did so by constructing the hermeneutical context in which the act of textual understanding takes place. We are concerned only with a narrow community of interpretive discourse, rational Muslim theists being the only members of this community. All the interpreters we consider are Muslims who claim rationality for their interpretation of the original sources. Of course, as Abrahamic theists these authors believe in the existence of a unique necessary intelligent first cause of the universe and also that this perfect being is God. Moreover, as rational theists they must be faithful to the psychological principles that establish their belief in God, namely, simplicity, sufficient reason, and trust. So the hermeneutical context for textual understanding is given by this narrow discourse community endeavoring to interpret God’s word. It follows that strict epistemic limits apply in this context because such limits play a critical role in arriving at the belief in God in the first place (by forcing the retreat to deep psychology). One of the basic reasons that Rahman’s theory of hermeneutics is deeply flawed is precisely because he circumvents these epistemic limits via a Kantian moral law in order to gain direct access to God’s mind. While our belief in God is rational, we are not even in an epistemic position to ascertain that He exists let alone determine what He is thinking. Given epistemic limits, our default reading of the Quran has to be determined by an application of the principle of simplicity to the cultural-linguistic conventions in which Quranic meanings are embedded. In other words, we have to go with a simple, conventional and literal reading except in cases where there is sufficient reason to interpret the text otherwise. Thus, in Chapter 1: Section 5, epistemic limits, simplicity and lack of sufficient reason were seen to be the rationale for literalism.

In this chapter, I chose to fully engage the liberalism of Rahman because among modern Muslim authors he seems to me to reflect the best combination of philosophical sophistication and realistic hermeneutics. But we were able to discover serious flaws in his project and offered the overall criticism that he fails to engage the logic of literalism (by failing to explain his departures from literal readings) and introduces relativism into Quranic interpretation (by aiming at an obscure moral law). Modernists such as Rahman have tended to focus on the Quran because the Sunna is often seen as an additional burden on their project of harmonizing the primal sources with Western modernity. In their search for a more flexible approach to the sources, it could be quite natural for them to take unjustified liberties with Quranic interpretation that would open them up to the kinds of criticisms made in this chapter. In the next chapter, we will consider whether other modernists such as Abdolkarim Soroush and Rashid Rida can do better at justifying their departures from literalism.

2 Ibid., pp. 34-5, 103: Ibn Taymiya writes that the medieval Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna and al-Farabi ‘do not admit that transcending the highest sphere there may be something which can act or produce. So there is nothing beyond which speaks or moves in any way – not even an angel let alone the
Lord of the World. These people also affirm intelligences which do not change or move, have no speech and have no action, and so their first principle. According to them whatever comes to the mind of the prophets comes from the Active Intelligence’ (Ibn Taymiya, Kitab al-Nubuwwat, Cairo, 1346 A.H., p. 168, 4:23 cited by Rahman, Fazlur, Prophecy in Islam, p. 103).

3 Rahman, Prophecy in Islam, pp. 38, 72, 74
4 Ibid., p. 36
5 I owe this observation to my colleague Muhammad Arif.
7 Ibid., p. 31
8 Ibid., pp. 32-3
9 My colleagues Omar Raza and Muhammad Arif pointed this out to me.
10 While the Quran has plenty more to say on the personality of the Prophet, the concept of rasūl is the one that is relevant to his role in the process of revelation.
12 Rahman, Islam, pp. 13-4
13 Ibid., p. 14
15 Rahman, Islam, p. 36
16 Ibid., p. 39
17 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 19
18 “Truth” in Encyclopedia of the Qur’an: “The original meaning of the Arabic root h-q-q has been obscured but can be recovered by reference to the corresponding root in Hebrew with its meanings of (a) ‘to cut in, engrave’ in wood, stone or metal, (b) ‘to inscribe, write, portray’ (Macdonald and Calverley, Haqq). From this it can be inferred that the primary meaning of haqq in Arabic is ‘established fact’, and therefore ‘truth’ is secondary; its opposite is bāṭil [vain] (in both readings)” (Ibid.). Yet as one of the ninety-nine canonical “names of God”, haqq will exploit both of these meanings as well as the original notions of forming or inscribing. Besides the five times the term is introduced formally as a divine name, it is found 247 times in the Qur’ān.”
19 Ibid: “The crucial difference presented by Qur’ānic use centers on the creator, one of whose proper names — al-haqq — should remind us that whatever be true or real about everything else, the created universe derives from this One who is paradigmatically true and real... The thing which most deserves to be [called] true is the One whose existence is established by virtue of its own essence, forever and eternally; and its knowledge as well as the witness to it is true forever and eternally (al-Ghazālī, Ninety-nine names, 124, commenting on al-haqq as a name of God).”
20 Ibid: “Notice how “truth” can never be anyone’s possession; it remains a lure yet with definite parameters for the search: the “straight path” (Q 1:6) of the Qur’ān together with the sunna (q.v.) or traditions of the Prophet, enshrined in and interpreted by the community or umma. So the truth revealed in the Qur’ān becomes a path to discovering the “truth of things” as created, by which one can hope to find one’s way to the creator.”
21 Ibid: “Hence the very One “who sent down upon you the book with the truth” (Q 3:3), “verifies the truth by his words” (Q 8:7; 10:82). If the creating word makes things to be, “it is he who created the heavens and the earth (q.v.) in truth” (Q 6:73), and that same word in the Qur’ān becomes the “call to the truth” (Q 13:14) and the ground by which a people “guide [others] in the truth” (Q 7:159, 181) and to the truth. Hence the centrality of promise “be patient; surely God’s promise is true” (Q 30:60; cf. 31:33); indeed the Qur’ān is given “that they might know that God’s promise is true” (Q 18:21), even though the truth asserted there remains to be fulfilled. For with promise comes faith (q.v.), “those who believe follow the truth from their Lord” (q.v.; Q 47:3), which is the Qur’ān “guiding to the truth and to a straight path” (Q 46:30)... “This is truth, certain truth” (Q 56:95; 69:51), or alternatively, the “truth of certainty,” aqq al-yaqīn, where yaqīn carries more metaphysical than epistemological connotations: the truth which stands fast.”
22 Zahniser, Mathias, A. H., “Knowing and Thinking”, p. 286
23 Ibid., p. 287
24 Ibid., p. 288
25 Ibid., pp. 288-9
26 Ibid., p. 290
27 Of course truth is ontologically prior to reason. But since we need reason to recognize truth, reason has epistemological priority.
28 Reason is a normative concept and one may freely choose to live a rational life. Thus, the second conceptual priority of the Quran is more precisely freely choosing to be rational, that is, rational choice.


30 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 14


32 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 14

33 We know from Rahman’s philosophical work that he subscribes to the onto-theology of the necessary being expounded by Avicenna. I thank Rizvi for pointing this out to me. However, I am discussing his moral hermeneutics and in this context his Avicennan philosophical theology is a problem for him because a believer in the necessary first cause is not rationally justified in making departures from literalism without sufficient reason, as explained in Chapter 1 (Section 5). In the current context, Rahman does not offer a sufficient reason to give a non-literal meaning to divine attributes such as al-awwal (the First) and al-aakhir (the Last). As I explain later in the main text, neither is morality a sufficient reason to deviate from, for example, literalistic symbolism (see Chapter 4 endnote 16).

34 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 14


36 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 155

37 Ibid., p. 20

38 Rahman, Major Themes, p. 5

39 Rahman, Islam, pp. 32-3

40 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 154,6

41 Rahman, Major Themes, p. 27

42 Ibid., p. 3

43 Ibid., p. 11

44 Ibid., p. 27

45 Note that even here he forgets symbol probably because he is thinking in a strictly functional way and to his mind symbol has no functional role, that is, symbols are useless vis a vis moral behavior and sociopolitical success.

46 Rahman, Major Themes, p. 18.

47 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 19

48 Rahman, Major Themes, p. 27

49 Ibid., pp. 25-8

50 This is obviously not to say that some people do not attain pure submission as motive when they offer their prayers in congregation.

51 I explained at the end of Chapter 1: Section 5 how my literalism avoids making claims about divine intentionality.

52 Rahman, Islam and Modernity, p. 8

53 Ibid

54 Ibid

55 As noted in Chapter 1: Section 5, Rahman actually misreads the objectivity school on this point.


58 Rahman, “Riba and Interest”, p. 3

59 Ibid., p. 9

60 Ibid., p. 8


62 Ibid., p. 47

63 Rahman, “Riba and Interest”, p. 5

64 Ibid., p. 6. The two commentators are Mujahid and Zayd b. Aslam (famous Successor) and their reports are recorded in the Quran commentary of Al-Tabari (Rahman, "Riba and Interest", p. 5 taken from Tabari, Tafsir, Cairo, 1374 A.H., VII: 204).

1. Mujahid’s report: Muhammad b. Amr reported to us, he said that Abu ‘Asim related to him from ‘Isa, he from Ibn Abu Najih, who said that concerning the Qur’anic verse ‘O you who believe, do not devour ribâ with continued redoubling’, Mujahid said, ‘this is the riba of pre-Islamic days’. 
2. Zayd b. Aslam’s report: The ribā of pre-Islamic days consisted in its doubling and redoubling in terms of cash [in the case of borrowed money] and age [in the case of borrowed cattle].

From these reports it would appear that in pre-Islamic times ribā referred to usury and the reports appear to give some credence to Rahman’s view that 3:130 banning usury is the central verse vis-à-vis the ban on ribā. But these reports from Al-Tabari seem to conflict with another report also on the authority of Zayd b. Aslam and recorded in a much earlier work - the Muwatta of Malik (Rahman, “Riba and Interest”, p. 5 taken from Malik, Muwatta, Kitab al-buyu’, Bab al-riba, this report is also recorded in other early works).

3. Zayd b. Aslam’s report recorded earlier: In pre-Islamic days ribā operated in this manner: if a man owed another a debt, at the time of its maturity the creditor would ask the debtor: ‘Will you pay up or will you increase (am turbi from root r-b-w)? If the latter paid up, the creditor received back the sum; otherwise the principal was increased on the stipulation of a further term.

This report elaborates the pre-Islamic ribā process but makes no mention of ‘doubling and redoubling’. Given the apparent conflict in these reports, Rahman makes a general case that all such hadith material is full of controversy because the reports from the early generations of Muslims often conflict with each other. I will leave a discussion of Rahman’s view on the hadith material for Appendix 2 (endnotes). For now, I simply point out that there is no conflict in these three reports. The earliest recorded report (listed as no. 3 above) elaborates the process of the steady growth of the lender’s power over the borrower. Some figures will help. Mr. L gives Mr. B a sum of 100 dirhams to be returned in a year with a 20% increase. At the end of year 1, Mr. B is in difficulty and cannot pay 120 dirhams (100 dirhams plus 20% increase). So the principal becomes 120 dirhams. This increase of the principal is what Zayd b. Aslam is referring to when he says that ‘the creditor would ask the debtor: ‘Will you pay up or will you increase?’’ At the end of year 2, Mr. B is still in difficulty and cannot pay 144 dirhams (120 plus the 20% increase). At the end of year 3, Mr. B cannot pay 173 dirhams (144 plus 20% increase). At the end of year 4, Mr. B cannot pay 207 dirhams (173 plus 20% increase). Notice that the principal has more than doubled from 100 dirhams to 207 dirhams. In four years, Mr. B owes more than twice what he had borrowed. At the end of year 8, Mr. B owes 430 dirhams. Thus, in eight years, the principal will have doubled and redoubled. If Mr. B took the loan when his first child was born, then the principal will have doubled and redoubled before the child’s 8th birthday. So the earliest recorded report from Zayd b. Aslam is consistent with the later recorded reports of Mujahid and Zayd. The earliest recorded report associates pre-Islamic ribā with the process through which the principal doubles and redoubles while the later recorded reports do not elaborate but simply associate pre-Islamic ribā with the doubling and redoubling. Rahman sees a conflict in these reports only because he neglects the time dimension in the process of doubling and redoubling.

All of this also makes a lot of common sense. Most borrowers (even in hard times) would not be so stupid as to take a loan that had 50% usurious interest on it. That would be financial suicide within a year. However, some borrowers would be optimistic enough to take a loan on 20% interest. This is the case with many people and organizations that borrow from banks today. In the second verse (3:130), the Quran bans ‘ribā with continued redoubling’ and this should be considered as a ban on annual interest rates in the range of 15% - 25% or so upwards that result in the steady and somewhat inevitable growth of lender power until in a few short years the borrower is reduced to nothing. The multibillion dollar question is what could be the purpose of the final ban on ribā in the last verses (2:275-80)? Here the profit-seeking lender is told to ‘remit what is left of ribā’ and to take back his capital wealth and pretty much call it a day. What’s going on?

I think that there is an obvious explanation. Beyond placing prohibitions on noxious pre-Islamic practices, the Quran has a normativity all its own. The Quran and the Prophet were sent to lay down the law of God and practice His culture. This had something to do with prohibiting pre-Islamic practices, but it went far beyond that. Allah wants perfection and this, I believe, is the import of 5:4 “this day have I perfected for you your religion and chosen for you Islam as religion”. Alcohol was restricted when believers were told not to pray in a state of intoxication. But Allah did not stop at that. He banned it completely. Not only this, He later communicated through the Prophet a ban on the trade of alcohol as well (4 A.H). Similarly, usurious interest was prohibited but this was followed by a complete ban on all interest. Further, hadith materials even ban all participation in the making of a ribā contract. For the
Quran, it is not only Satan but the footsteps of Satan that are foul. The perfection of Islam lies in the fact that it declares even the footsteps off limits.

Another explanation of the final ban (2:275-80) is that the three reports from Mujahid and Zayd refer to pre-Islamic ribā as a steady growth of lender power but do not exclude the possibility that, in pre-Islamic times, ribā may have also referred to practices where the lender had a relatively smaller advantage over the borrower, as when a lower rate of interest was charged. It is common sense that if loans with high interest rates were being offered, some nice people would have offered loans at lower rates for example to acquaintances, friends, and relatives. Even here the lender’s advantage of having a fixed (though relatively smaller) rate of return in a risky business environment could be a form of pre-Islamic ribā though not as conspicuous as the first uglier form. Mujahid’s and Zayd’s attention may simply have been captured by the uglier form and this may have prevented them from making the more academic point that lending on any interest rate high or low was called ribā. From common sense, if a high interest rate was ribā then a low interest rate would be less ribā (but still ribā). But the growth of lender power was the morally noxious phenomenon and everyone’s attention may have been riveted by it for anyone to take issue with situations of lower interest lending that did not as often have unhappy endings. Arguably, God wanted to put an end to the whole racket so He did not make a distinction in the final ban (2:275-80) between high and low increase but literally banned any increase whatever. Rahman has some thoughts along similar lines:

A natural question arises here, viz., if riba is only that form of usurious transaction which has been described above and if only this form is banned, then why is it that, as an effect of the riba-ordinance of the Qur’an, all interest seems to have been abolished as is, indeed, testified by historical evidence? The answer to this is that we do not hold that in each and every given case of loan, the capital was thus doubled and redoubled—indeed, there must have been a great deal of variation in individual cases depending on circumstances, e.g., the nature of investment, the amount of risk, etc. But what matters is that all these individual cases were part of one riba-system in whose nature it was to be so exorbitantly usurious. Therefore, what had to be banned was the system as a whole, and hence no exceptions could be made in individual cases. When the entire system was banned, the milder cases within that system were also naturally abolished since the system itself was tyrannical. It cannot, therefore, be argued that since the Qur’an abolished even the milder cases, it must be concluded that the bank-interest of today also stands condemned. This is because the bank-interest of today is a separate kind of system (Rahman, “Riba and Interest”, pp. 7-8).

I am reminded by Rahman’s words (‘as an effect of the riba-ordinance of the Qur’an, all interest seems to have been abolished as is, indeed, testified by historical evidence’) that the early Muslims, some of whom are in my universe of trust, understood the Quran as banning all forms of interest. Going back to the philosophical hermeneutics of Chapter 1, and given my metaphysical deafness and blindness and inability to know what God is thinking, I have no choice but to see riba as interest because the Companions and Successors also saw it as such. While I am constrained by deaf-blind trust to interpret riba as interest, Rahman feels at liberty to apply the concept of riba in a non-literary way. This non-literalism becomes his basis for excusing Western interest banking from the ban on riba. He suggests that interest banking is socially useful saying that there is a ‘fundamental change in the role of modern banking in the context of the “development economy”’ (Rahman, Major Themes, p. 41). Because it is socially useful it is also morally good. Rahman seems to be following the Prophet in reaching to the moral law and with the universal moral principle of socioeconomic justice in hand he wants to legalize interest banking because it contributes to the ‘development economy’ and the public good in general. Thus, Rahman’s view is that God intends the moral and social good, and given that modern interest banking plays such a critical role in the development economy, God could hardly have intended a wholesale ban on interest. This is not an argument from necessity that allows interest banking for a transitional period before a complete ban on interest can gradually be brought into effect. Au contraire, Rahman is here simply abandoning the Quran’s literal ideal of an interest free economy. And he can do this because he feels that it is objectively possible to know that a wholesale ban on interest is not what God intends.

I am in agreement with Rahman’s view that God intends the moral and social good (we know this from the Quran). However, I think this has nothing to do with interest banking. Human beings are hardly in a position to agree on whether interest banking advances the moral and social good or thwarts it. For example, George Bush could raise billions of dollars through debt financing to fund a war in Iraq.
An American buying Treasury Bills does not usually do so with the intention of funding the war. He just wants a safe and fixed return on his investment. Yet this desire for a safe and fixed return funds the war (and also increases U.S. debt). It is not the same with equity where a person thinks far more carefully before investing, because of the risk of losing their investment. So there are serious negative consequences of the interest based system. On the basis of negative consequences such as this, conservative Muslims have argued that because God intends the moral and social good, He has banned interest. (This is not my argument here.) So how should we decide whether interest advances or thwarts the social good? Maybe what we need is a wider perspective from where to judge the issue, a perspective that may be offered by an expert. But economists are divided. Keynes and some of the neoclassical school argue for an interest free system whereas some neo-Keynesians support the interest based one. Enter Rahman, who is not an expert in economics. He declares that God (the being with the required width of perspective) intends to allow interest banking in the modern age. There is only one question that comes to mind. How does he know? This last question obviously expresses the basic hermeneutic principle articulated earlier. We don’t know the life and mind of God and must fall back on an accurate interpretation of the text. The text says that lenders who repent can have only their capital wealth back. No interest. As long as nothing in the Prophet’s actions and words contradicts the literal interpretation, the issue is resolved in favor of conservatives, but that is not the point. The point is that the issue is resolved on the basis of a rational hermeneutic principle upon which all must agree.

Rahman’s views on *ribā* offer a demonstration of other problems in his general hermeneutics. First of all, if Allah wanted to control interest rather than ban it, why didn’t He just say so. Why does a literal reading of the Quran give us a ban rather than a regime of regulation? It is not as if Allah was lost for words in regulating other aspects of life, as witnessed for example by the rules for divorce or the elaborate inheritance laws in the Quran. There is an unmistakable note of impatience with the practice of *ribā*. “Those who devour *ribā* will not stand except as one whom Satan by his touch has driven to madness” (2:275), and those who do not give up their demand for *ribā* should “take notice of war from Allah and His messenger” (2:279). Intoxicants and gambling, that are also banned, are likewise linked to Satan as an “abomination and work of Satan” (5:93). Both the lay and seasoned reader of the Quran can easily pick up the variations in Allah’s tone from subject to subject. If Allah wants to ban something, or get very upset at someone (e.g. Abu Lahab (111:1-5)), prescribe killing in holy war (2:216, 244; 4:74, 76), or declare war on people engaged in a certain practice, He says so in plain words. If He wants to accommodate something or someone that He does not like, He says so. For example, Allah accommodates the hypocrites as Muslims in a legal sense (2:15; 4:63), while at the same time expressing an intense loathing of them (4:145). So the problem with Rahman’s hermeneutics is that his method is free to undermine Allah’s commitment to clarity (see p.159). Asked to choose between Rahman’s hermeneutics and God’s commitment, I go with God. To state the obvious, He is at the center of my universe of trust and Rahman may be nowhere in this universe.

Another related problem is that Rahman’s moral reading of the texts comes at the expense of a symbolic reading. First of all, while accepting that the *ribā* injunction advances socio-economic justice, conservatives may also see in it a sign of God (as noted in Chapter 4 (pp. 161-3), the Quran encourages them to see injunctions as signs). If we struggle to create an interest free economy we will attain an enduring state of peace and security, and this will be a sign of God. Moreover, as with all symbols, *ribā* also becomes a basis for Muslim unity. At one point, Rahman observes that the ban on interest is ‘a stand to which even today the vast majority of Muslims cling’. What Rahman has observed here is the phenomenon of Muslim unity around a symbol of Allah. Symbols such as *ribā* give Muslims a distinct cultural identity. Muslims in 7th century Arabia were united on the basis of a distinct culture with well-defined laws, symbols, and rituals, and it is this unity that eventually made them stronger than their opponents. The lesson is simple – in unity lies strength and unity is attained on the basis of a distinct culture. The first Muslims in Mecca and then Medina did not attempt to interpret the Quran in a way that would harmonize their culture with the predominant pagan culture of the wealthy and powerful upper strata of Arabian society. On the basis of this historical observation, we can demand of liberals such as Rahman that they not approach the Quran with a motivation to harmonize it to whatever appeals to them in Western culture whether it is an issue of banking, modesty, feminism, ritualism or whatever else. The unity of the Muslim community is a basic theme in the Quran (3:28, 118; 4:139, 144;
Yet another related problem is that the enduring principles that Rahman discovers are far too general. From a specific injunction against ribā, he draws the general principle of the preservation of socio-economic justice via the regulation of interest banking practices. But the regulations on interest banking can have huge variations in different times and places, and so it is really left to human judgment whether there is any breach of the general principle of socio-economic justice. If an unjust regime of regulation does rear its ugly head, will the people being exploited have the political will and wherewithal to change the system? For example, third world debt results from an exploitation of third world resources, and is preserved by the incentive to continue to exploit these resources. Are we going to see a radical change in this situation? And even if so, what about the millions who have lost their dreams and lives in the process? And when a cure does come, how do we know that a new oppressive regime of regulation will not emerge to claim fresh victims? Interest banking is a controversial issue, and in the presence of the literal word of God, if all that we are willing to take away is the general principle of the preservation of socio-economic justice, we choose to place an immense load on human wisdom. The fact is that an optimal enduring balance of a regime of interest regulation is quite elusive to human learning and wisdom. This would explain God’s outright ban on interest. And of course there are other issues similarly elusive to human wisdom such as the issue of attaining a balance in gender relations, or a balance in the relation of individual to community, or of a ruler to those being ruled. (These issues are the staple diet of conservative scholars as is the example of modesty that follows.) For example, from the Quranic injunction of hijāb, Rahman draws the enduring principle of modesty. Again, this is a very general principle placing an immense load on human wisdom. After all, given the context, there would seem to be no immodesty for a woman to wear a t-shirt and skirt on a London street, or a shorter skirt while playing tennis, or a swim suit while swimming or playing beach volleyball. The principle of modesty is very general indeed, and opens the door to a wide variety of gender interactions across times and places. Because the nature of evil and corruption, according to the Quran, is that it presents itself in ways that seem fair and is a tremendous challenge for the human intellect (on its own) even to identify, principles that are so general may be hard to defend against corruption. If it is okay to go to a dance party in an appealing dress because the context does not suggest immodesty, then is this not precisely the kind of situation where the human mind finds it difficult to draw lines in the sand? Are we not guilty of blurring the borders and making things difficult to judge? And are these not the footsteps of Satan (as opposed to the person of Satan) that the Quran explicitly warns us about? “O you who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly; and follow not the footsteps of Satan; for he is to you an avowed enemy” (2:208, also 6:142).  

Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 8
Chapter 3

The Humanism of AbdulKarim Soroush

A critical difference between the hermeneutics of Rahman and Soroush is that the former does not acknowledge epistemic limits in reading God’s mind while the latter does. In this respect, Soroush’s hermeneutics is clearly superior to Rahman’s. Having acknowledged that there are epistemic limits in understanding the nature and mind of God, in grasping ‘quintessential religion’, Soroush arrives at a hermeneutics that is very different from Rahman’s. While Rahman believes that we are able to authoritatively ascertain the meanings intended by God, Soroush believes that our inability to authoritatively ascertain God’s meanings results in different people arriving at different meanings. So there is no single authoritative way of ascertaining God’s meanings in the manner Rahman meant to suggest. For this reason, our epistemic limits and human fallibility result in an irreducible pluralism, an irreducible diversity of interpretations of religious experiences and religious texts.

In the face of epistemic limits, what Soroush conspicuously fails to do is fall back onto deep psychology and offer a hermeneutical theory that is in harmony with it. In contrast to the literalist Betti/Hirsch strategy discussed in Chapter 1: Section 5, Soroush does not fall back on psychological principles such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Rather, he believes that our epistemic limits and human fallibility lead us to quite a different result, namely, the truth of pluralism in both religious experience and textual interpretation. In this move to pluralism, Soroush is privileging theoretical over practical reason and this is a very unwise strategy in a realm governed by strict epistemic limits. In other words, when Soroush realizes that there are epistemic limits in arriving at the belief in God, and in understanding His nature, then he ought to switch modes to practical reasoning and explore deep psychological motivations such as simplicity and sufficient reason. Instead, he chooses to bask in his epistemic limitations, in the limits of theoretical reason, and decides that human fallibility has to mean that there is an irreducible plurality both in religious experience and textual interpretation.

There may be no way to prioritize one experience or interpretation over another and there is nothing for us to do but to embrace this irreducible pluralism. But we have already seen in Chapter 1 (for e.g., pp. 41-2) that there is plenty for us to do in the face of epistemic limits. We face the practical problem of having to decide what to be and what to do within limited resources of time and intellect, and for that we require a deep understanding of our own psychology. Deep psychology is the final arbiter in any context governed by epistemic limits and it allows us to differentiate and evaluate different worldviews. From the standpoint of practical reason, the standpoint of human psychology, not all views are on par and there is no irreducible pluralism. Only a theoretical mystical euphoria could lead to the vision of such undifferentiated bliss.

There is a serious contradiction at the heart of Soroush’s view. The psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity gives him his belief in one God (even if he has independent mystical access to a higher being). Moreover, as a (self-proclaimed) free thinker, he is not simply a Muslim by birth but has independent reasons for being a Muslim rather than a Christian. The psychology of logic, simplicity, and sufficient reason gives him reason to favour Allah over the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, in acquiring his identity as a rational theistic Muslim, Soroush already subscribes to the deep psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity. None of this is said or acknowledged in his work but it
is true as long as he believes that he is a rational Muslim theist (which he obviously does). When it comes time to interpret the text of the Quran, he acknowledges epistemic limits and human fallibility but he abandons simplicity and sufficient reason. Instead, he opts for an irreducible pluralism. The problem is: when epistemic limits force us to apply simplicity in order to arrive at the belief in one rather than many gods, why do epistemic limits not force us to apply simplicity in reading the text of the Quran? Why does simplicity apply in the first case but not the second? Why does pluralism apply in the second case but not the first? Why is there not a plurality of gods? Why is pluralism reserved for hermeneutics but not philosophical theology? Where is the consistency? Keep in mind that the present thesis has consistently applied simplicity both to theology and hermeneutics.

Thus, Soroush is under an obligation to read the texts in a simple manner unless he has sufficient reason to do otherwise. But a simple reading of the Quran will demolish the Trinity and Sorosh’s irreducible religious pluralism with it. It is not even conceivable that Soroush could propose a sufficient reason for reading the Quran in a non-literal way (on this matter) because for him the Quran is the result of his beloved Prophet’s sublime mystical experiences. The sublime mystic Muhammad may have produced time bound views on economics and politics but certainly not on the nature of the eternal God. If the Quran says that God is not triune then that is just as true today as it was when Muhammad said it. The problem for Sorosh is that the simplicity that gave him his one God will not allow his irreducible religious pluralism and pluralist hermeneutics to stand.

The same situation unfolds regarding the revelation narrative. The Quran’s metaphysics of revelation is quite straightforward, namely, God sent His archangel Gabriel with fully formed verses to be recited to Muhammad. This means that the Quran is solely and purely God’s word with the direct implication that its (divine) commandments and symbols (e.g. Islamic government (8: 39; 9: 29; 24: 55), ribā (2: 275-80), etc.) ought to be seen as binding till the Day of Judgment because of epistemic limits and the problem of giving His words an interpretation that the Prophet did not give them. For a humanist such as Soroush, who believes in an irreducible pluralism safeguarded by the modern democratic polity, all of this is difficult to swallow, and so, in keeping with other modernist authors, he is against traditional hermeneutics. However, he sets himself apart from many modernists by his strategy of attacking traditional hermeneutics right at its source, namely, the traditional metaphysics of revelation. This is a strategy that he shares with Rahman, and just as in the latter’s case, there is every indication that one of the reasons that Soroush offers a new theory of revelation is his discontent with traditional hermeneutics. In this sense, it is his inclination towards a non-traditional, humanist, and pluralist hermeneutics that motivates his development of a theory of revelation. Thus, while on the face of things it may seem that his hermeneutics is based on his theory of revelation there is every indication that things are the other way around and the hermeneutics comes first with a theory of revelation developed in support of it. In other words, what led to his abandonment of the simple revelation narrative in the Quran was his strong (and quite understandable) desire for peaceful, pluralistic co-existence.

We know that the metaphysics of revelation rationally justifies a hermeneutical strategy. For example, if the metaphysics is that the Quran is God’s word (and not Muhammad’s) then the hermeneutics will be a literalist one because of epistemic limits in reading God’s mind. The critical question is the reverse of this, that is, can hermeneutics justify the metaphysics of revelation? Continuing with the literalism example, if one does not warm to a literalist hermeneutics then it is
best to begin with a hermeneutics that one does embrace. This new hermeneutics becomes the new point of departure. It becomes the basis on which one reads the Quran and interprets its account of the metaphysics of revelation. The critical question is whether this is a rational procedure. Can a humanist hermeneutics justify a non-literal reading of the metaphysics of revelation in the Quran? Can we begin with hermeneutics and end with metaphysics or does metaphysics always come first?

There is an obvious sense in which hermeneutics is first. You cannot read the metaphysics of the Quran without a hermeneutical strategy because no reading can be done without at least a minimal hermeneutics. According to the principle of simplicity, it is better to assume less rather than more, and so we ought to begin with a minimal hermeneutics. A minimal hermeneutics would simply be to take the Quran at its word and believe that the metaphysics is literal, namely, God’s word given via Gabriel to Muhammad. Now we could abandon this literalist metaphysics if there were sufficient reason to. So the question is whether a humanist hermeneutics offers a sufficient reason to abandon our simple revelation narrative? The answer is that a humanist hermeneutics is not in a position to challenge the default literalist metaphysics because as an interpretive strategy it is itself highly controversial. How can such a controversial hermeneutical strategy be a sufficient reason to abandon the principle of simplicity, how can it be considered superior to simple literalist hermeneutics?

The basic reason for the controversial status of Soroush’s humanist hermeneutics is that it is based on collective humanist rationality and there is no way to show that the latter is superior to divine rationality. To be more specific, the basic problem for collective humanist rationality is that it is collective. While collective rationality may ground democracy, justice, and human rights (making possible life in society) there is simply no way to demonstrate that individual rationality does so. In other words, the collective may have no traction with the individual. It is obviously unacceptable to simply assume that individual rationality grounds democracy, justice, and human rights without full immersion in a millennia old meta-ethical debate on whether the individual has, all things considered, reason to be good and just.5 And if individual rationality cannot be shown to ground these values then in what way could the collective (that is made up of individuals) ground them in any lasting way. This is also known as the free-rider problem or the tragedy of the commons. Individual self-interest is famously known to undermine the collective welfare. Soroush’s collective humanist rationality is far from being a candidate to replace divine rationality and its literalist commandments to the individual. Literalist religion shores up individual morality and it is highly controversial for Soroush to maintain that his collective humanist rationality can somehow succeed at this task. In maintaining this he has virtually ignored a millennia old meta-ethical controversy and simply assumed a positive answer to the question: “Does the individual have, all things considered, (extra-religious) reason to be good and just?”

So let us then outline the structure of the argument against Soroush. Because a humanist hermeneutics is based on a collective rationality that is mired in a millennia-old controversy it cannot supply a sufficient reason to displace the simple literalist hermeneutics and the traditional metaphysics that it grounds. This is a compelling criticism of Soroush’s view on revelation and the hermeneutics that it was deployed to support.
1. Soroush on Revelation

Soroush’s theory of revelation is metaphysically less burdensome than Rahman’s because he does not posit a moral law as an additional metaphysical reality.\(^6\) He does not claim that the moral law is an identifiable part of God’s anatomy. Thus, God remains metaphysically simple. However, in keeping with Rahman (and the medieval Muslim philosophers) there is no person called Gabriel. Soroush’s view is that the Prophet had the ability to get in touch with his innermost self and as the innermost self of all human beings is divine, the Prophet made contact with God.

The question whether the inspiration comes from outside or from inside is really not relevant, because at the level of revelation there is no difference between outside and inside. The inspiration comes from the Self of the Prophet. The Self of every individual is divine, but the Prophet differs from other people in that he has become aware of its divinity. He has actualized its potential. His Self has become one with God. Now don’t get me wrong on this point: This spiritual union with God does not mean that the Prophet has become God. It is a union that is limited and tailored to his size. It is human size, not God’s size. The mystical poet Jalaluddin Rumi describes this paradox with the words: ‘Through the Prophet’s union with God, the ocean is poured into a jar.’\(^7\)

Muhammad’s experience of his self is formless. It is a mystical experience but not one of forms or words but rather a formless intellectual/spiritual/moral epiphany. Such epiphanies are the content of revelation and it is only this formless intellectual/spiritual/moral content that God gives to His Prophet. God does not give His Prophet a verbal revelation. It is Muhammad who composes the verses of the Quran inspired by the formless content of revelation and in keeping with the limitations of his own understanding and skills.\(^8\) Thus, as compared to Rahman, Soroush’s theory of revelation is more in line with the view of medieval Muslim philosophers that the Prophet’s ‘imaginative faculty represents in the form of particular, sensible images and verbal modes, the universal simple truth grasped by the prophet’s intellect.’\(^9\)

This is how it comes about that: the formless meaning is from God and the form is from Muhammad… the water is from God and the jug is from Muhammad. This is a God who pours the ocean of his being into a small jug of a figure known as Muhammad Ibn Abdullah. And so everything becomes imbued with Muhammad: Muhammad is an Arab, so the Qur’an becomes Arabic… The Qur’an’s eloquence too, has highs and lows in keeping with the Prophet’s moods.\(^10\)

While the formless revelation is from God so that He is the inspiration, it is unequivocally Muhammad who is the author of the Quran.

But his personality also plays an important role in shaping the text. His personal history: his father, his mother, his childhood. And even his moods. If you read the Koran you feel that the Prophet is sometimes jubilant and highly eloquent while at other times he is bored and quite ordinary in the way he expresses himself. All these things have left their imprint on the text of the Koran. That is the purely human side of revelation.\(^11\)
As we noted also in the case of Rahman, Soroush’s views reflect an “Enlightenment” theory of the process of revelation. Why posit God in every explanation? Humans evolved through natural selection and even if God exists He is not meddling and interfering with the process of evolution. Physical objects move according to natural laws (inertia, law of conservation of energy and momentum etc.) and even if God exists He is not meddling and interfering in every motion. God does not interfere with the workings of the natural world. So God did not interfere with Muhammad’s composition of the Quran. The Quran is not a purely supernatural production, but a quasi-natural product of the Prophet’s mind and circumstances - quasi-natural (not fully natural) because it is the result of extraordinary revelatory experiences. In the background there is a supernatural God giving formless (non-verbal) inspiration. To be sure, the process Soroush has in mind for the authorship of the Quran is dissimilar from my authorship of this thesis. In the case of this thesis, it may be true that God is in the background as I strike away at my keyboard. But the critical difference between the Quran and this thesis is that, as an author, Muhammad was spiritually far superior to me and had made contact with his inner divine self. God was in the background but in touch in some formless intellectual/spiritual/moral way. Thus, while the author of this thesis and the Quran are both human beings, the former is ordinary while the latter is extraordinary. Even so, this extraordinary author is still a human being.

Of course, Muhammad was an extraordinary figure. He was a flower in the desert... The other residents of the Arabian peninsula did not experience any soul searching challenges, nor did they reach the threshold of receiving solutions, nor did they possess Muhammad’s theoretical and practical certainty and courage, nor did they have his talents for articulation and imagination... In sum, this matchless figure, with his wakeful heart, insightful eyes, perceptive mind and expressive tongue, was God’s creation and everything else was his creation and followed from his discoveries and his artistry. Muhammad was the book that God wrote and when Muhammad read the book of his being it became the Qur’an. And the Qur’an was the word of God. God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qur’an, just as God created the bee and the bee produced honey. And honey was the product of revelation.¹²

In the same vein:

Anything that happens in the world happens in accordance with God’s knowledge, permission and will. A monotheist has no doubt about this. Be that as it may, we say that the cherry is the fruit of the cherry tree. Do we have to say that the cherry is the fruit of God in order to be monotheist? ... The Quran was the product of a virtuous tree – the Prophet’s persona – which bore fruit by God’s permission, and this is identical to revelation being sent down to us and an act of God.¹³

Just as the cherry is the fruit of the cherry tree, the Quran is a product of Muhammad. However, as the cherry tree and Muhammad are products of God, both the cherry and the Quran are indirectly also products of God. But more precisely, for Soroush the Quran is more than just indirectly the product of God because Muhammad enjoys an especial mystical closeness to God.

God’s apostles are so close to God and they so lose themselves in God that their word is the same as the word of God, and their commands and prohibitions and their likes and dislikes
are the same as God’s commands and prohibitions and likes and dislikes. The beloved Prophet of Islam was a human being and he acknowledged and was conscious of his humanity, but this human being had, at the same time, acquired such a divine hue and quality – and the intermediaries (even Gabriel) had so fallen away from between him and God – that whatever he said was both earthly and divine; these two things were inseparable... God willing, if people reflect on this fine, mystical point, the problem will be solved and the key to what is being said will be discovered.\textsuperscript{14}

In the end, it seems that God had created a being that spoke like Him and so God had no reason to send a further (angelic) person with a verbal revelation. Muhammad was already speaking essentially the word of God. However, as ‘the Qur’an’s eloquence too, has highs and lows in keeping with the Prophet’s moods’, one assumes that Soroush does not believe that God is the word for word author (on pain of attributing mood swings to God). The only consistent way to understand his theory of revelation is to see God as the inspiration for its content and Muhammad as the actual author. So this is how we ought to understand his final view.

He is ‘a human being’ upon whom the Qur’an has ‘descended’ and from whom it has emanated. Both these notions appear in the text of the Qur’an. The two qualities ‘descended’ and ‘human’ are present in the deepest layers of revelation. And, without taking these two important qualities into account, we can arrive at no reason-pleasing interpretation of the Qur’an. Let me put it more simply again: I am not saying: God produces no fruits; I am saying: in order for God to produce fruits, He plants a tree and the tree produces fruits. I am not saying: God does not speak; I am saying: in order for God to speak, a Prophet speaks and his words are considered to be God’s words.\textsuperscript{15}

Thus, God created Muhammad and was his inspiration but Muhammad composed the Quran. Soroush’s final view is certainly less confusing than Rahman’s because the latter says that the composition is both God’s and Muhammad’s (‘the Word was given with the inspiration itself’). What is even more confusing in Rahman is the fact that Muhammad is seen to be aware of a very general moral law and it is this that allows him to articulate specific solutions for his times, e.g., the Quran’s inheritance laws. One imagines that the very general moral law did not compose the detailed inheritance laws word for word and that these were composed by Muhammad. But Rahman cannot escape down that alley because he has to maintain that Muhammad got the words during his moral epiphanies as ‘there exists, indeed, an organic relationship between feelings, ideas and words’ and ‘this relationship is so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex with a life of its own’. In some sense that is indeed very difficult to understand, the moral law was able to pinpoint the fraction of inheritance that is owed in virtually every conceivable situation. Thus, borrowing a phrase from the passage above, Rahman’s theory is not ‘reason-pleasing’. In this respect, Soroush has a better theory because he simply maintains that Muhammad, inspired by God, composed the Quran. But this now opens Soroush to the standard criticisms made against medieval Muslim philosophers who also believed that Muhammad alone is the word for word author. The first of these criticisms is that the Quran says that Muhammad had nothing to do with its composition. The Meccans charged Muhammad with being a poet but the Quran responded that Muhammad was not a poet who composed verses but a messenger who delivered commandments and warnings.
While the messenger in verse 40 is a reference to Gabriel, the Quran sees both Gabriel and Muhammad in the role of messengers for God. The Quran’s repeated admonitions (‘little it is ye believe!’; ‘little admonition it is ye receive’) and insistence on Muhammad’s status as messenger (“Muhammad is no more than a messenger (root ṭ-s-l)” (3:144) see also 7: 158; 48: 8-9, 29) fails to move Soroush, tough hombre that he is. This is despite the fact that the author of the verses quoted above says that if Muhammad were to make (or compose) any sayings in His name He would respond by severing his cardiac blood flow! But if Muhammad is a composer āla Soroush then is that not precisely what he has done, namely, compose sayings in the name of God. Yet Soroush insists that we can think of the Prophet as a high poet (composer).

The metaphor of poetry helps me to explain this. Just like a poet, the Prophet feels that he is captured by an external force. But in fact – or better: at the same time – the Prophet himself is everything: the creator and the producer… Like a poet again, the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.16

The Quran responds:

We have not instructed (the Prophet) in the (art of) Poetry (al-sh’ra), nor is it seemly for him: this is no less than a remembrance and a clear reading (root q-r-’) (36: 69)

The point that the revelation is a clear reading (a qur’ān: root q-r-’) and a writing (a kītab: root k-t-b) was also made in the last chapter. The verse above says that Muhammad was not trained in the art of poetry but that he received God’s revelation as a clear reading (that is, in the form of words). So the Prophet was not a composer or poet but rather received a reading/writing, that is, a verbal revelation. The Prophet was a messenger (root ṭ-s-l meaning ‘he sent’; noun rasūl meaning someone who is sent) who was sent with some words to all of the people. His status was no more than that of a person who is sent (“Muhammad is no more than a messenger (rasūl)” (3:144)). He is not a composer or poet. Soroush needs to tell us some story as to why he does not feel the need to attend to the Quranic contrast between messenger and poet. He does offer an aesthetic reason against the traditional view.

You have to concede that your metaphysics is a metaphysics of absence (bu’d) and separation (feraq), whereas my metaphysics is one of presence (qurb) and union (wesal). The impression that you have of God and Muhammad seems to be the imagery of a speaker and a loudspeaker or a tape recorder. The speaker speaks and the loudspeaker reflects it. So, the Prophet, like a loudspeaker, in nothing but a means and a tool.17
Soroush finds the traditional distance between God and messenger aesthetically displeasing. There is coldness in this distance, a mystical alienation in this notion that God is the speaker and Muhammad merely a loudspeaker. But it is not only that there is alienation in distance, Soroush also expresses aesthetic displeasure at Muhammad’s lowly status as a loudspeaker or a tape recorder (“The Prophet could hardly be made more lowly than this”). Surely, Muhammad is an original and creative being and not simply Gabriel’s parrot. According to Soroush, mystical closeness to God is the inspiration for a wondrous creativity and it is this theory that has proper aesthetic credentials. So this becomes his reason for rejecting the Quran’s view of Muhammad as messenger.

As you can see, the idea that the Qur’an is ‘a product of Muhammad’ — a Muhammad who was totally human — is entirely reasonable and well-established, and enjoys the endorsement of a large number of Muslim thinkers and mystics over the centuries. It has a profound meaning that is a hundred times more profound than the idea that it is ‘a product of Gabriel’... In this process and in relation to God, outside and inside are one and the same; as are the past and the future, and above and below... What difference does it make whether we say that God’s revelation comes to him from inside or from outside, and whether we say Gabriel appears to him from outside or from inside? Is God supposed to be outside the Prophet and is the Prophet supposed to be at some distance from God? I do not know why the notions of God’s closeness to His servant and the absorption of the contingent in the Necessary have been forgotten and replaced with the image of a sultan-emissary-peasant. (Italics added)

But the problem with Soroush’s aesthetic arguments is that they are easily countered by other perhaps better aesthetic arguments. While Soroush may find it aesthetically pleasing that the Quran is Muhammad’s word others may find it aesthetically far more pleasing that it is God’s word and that God is speaking directly in His own words to every reader of the Quranic text. For many people it is far more beautiful, romantic, and reassuring to believe this than to believe that the Quran is merely a human creation. It is true that Muhammad as God’s messenger is a lower status than Muhammad as the creator of the Quran. But that lower status brings Muhammad closer to the rest of us as an ordinary person and that is seen by most Muslims to be aesthetically far more pleasing. God loves Muhammad and Muhammad was not all that different from the rest of us. Thus, God could love each of us. In the same vein, Soroush may find it aesthetically pleasing that Muhammad is mystically close to God but others may find it aesthetically pleasing that God is close to all of us regardless of our mystical abilities. For the Quran, God is close to every person regardless of ability.

It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein. (50: 16)

... And know that Allah cometh between a man and his heart, and that it is He to Whom ye shall (all) be gathered. (8: 24)

Thus, God is very close indeed because He is even between the self and the understanding (or heart: root k-l-b) of every person. In any case, the fact that God trusted Muhammad with His message to all the worlds is not exactly an indication of Muhammad’s low status. To be declared truthful and trustworthy by one’s Creator is an unparalleled honour. Western culture may value originality and creativity more than Arab culture does while the latter culture may value integrity and
trustworthiness more than the former, but surely the point is to discover Muhammad’s actual status rather than to appeal to culturally tainted aesthetics. The Quran itself seems to value Muhammad’s exceptional ability to stand by the truth come what may, in other words, the Quran values fortitude, patience, and perseverance. For all these reasons, Soroush does not have a valid case based on aesthetics against Muhammad’s status as messenger.

The Quran also maintains that it is the person of Gabriel who brought the message to Muhammad. Soroush denies this. For him, Gabriel is not a person at all but merely a part of the Prophet, more specifically a part of his intellect, and when Gabriel ‘speaks’ it is really the Prophet’s higher self ‘speaking’ to his lower self. Soroush quotes Rumi to make his point.

The Gabriel will tell you the rest,
nay it is you who’s whispering in your own ear
It’s neither an I, nor an other, but a you who are I
Like times when you sink into sleep
from within yourself you appear before yourself
When you hear something from yourself, you imagine
someone else has told you a secret in your sleep
You’re not uni-layered, my good friend
You’re the oceans’ deep and the universe.

Soroush’s commentary on this verse is as follows:

As you can see, Rumi speaks of Gabriel as one of the gradations of human beings, whom he sees and describes as many-layered creatures, and he views human beings as deep oceans, with multiple layers, such that one layer can whisper secrets into the ears of another layer. He sees this as exactly the same as whispering of secrets into one’s ears by Gabriel. He even views speaking to another in one’s sleep as speaking to oneself. In this way, he opens a window to understanding the mechanism by which revelation and inspiration work. It is as if, in the process of revelation, a turbulence and tumult occur in the Prophet’s persona, such that the Prophet’s higher self speaks to his lower self. It goes without saying that all these things occur with God’s permission and by God’s doing.

Thus, Gabriel is one of the layers of a human being. More precisely, as we see in the passage below, he is one of the layers of the human intellect and because it is a prophet’s work to give form to the formless, the Prophet has given the form of Gabriel to his higher intellectual self. Thus, Gabriel (the Prophet’s higher intellectual self) gives the revelation to Muhammad (the Prophet’s lower intellectual self).

To put it more clearly, as far as Tabataba’i is concerned, the correct interpretation and meaning of God speaking about two-, three- and four-winged angels is that the Prophet is saying that he sees them with two, three and four wings. And what’s the difference between this and mystics’ suggestion that the Prophet used to make Gabriel appear or that Gabriel was, in fact, the Prophet’s intellect... The fact of the matter is that, if we base ourselves on the tradition of philosophers and mystics, we have to say that this was precisely the Prophet’s job: to give a form/face to formless/faceless truths. This is the special skill that
prophets possess (with mystics and poets, respectively, having it to lesser degrees)... But it is not just wings and flying angels that are the creations of the Prophet’s power of imagination. “Tablet”, “pen” and “throne” are too. They, too, are formless truths, which appear to the Prophet in these guises. And it is exactly the same with, “fire”, “houris”, “paths”, “scales” and so on. These are all images that have been borrowed from the life and environment to which the Prophet was accustomed, and there is not a single unfamiliar image among them.  

Against this last point, we could say that all of these images (throne, fire, scales etc.) may have been used by God precisely because they are familiar to human beings and will aid the human understanding of what God is saying. So it is not clear where Sorosh is going with that last point, but even attributing flying angels to the Prophet’s imagination and saying that they are an imaginary form given so that his higher intellect can express itself seems quite impossible to square with the Quran’s view that the angels existed before human beings were even created. Perhaps Sorosh would then say that the angels are not imaginary forms in human intellect but rather in God’s intellect. In the last chapter, we quoted some verses from the Quran that exemplifies the problem.

30) Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: “I will create a vicegerent on earth.” They said, “Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? - whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?” He said: “I know what ye know not.” 31) And He taught Adam the nature of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: “Tell Me the nature of these if ye are right” 32) They said: “Glory to thee: of knowledge we have none, save what Thou hast taught us: in truth it is Thou who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom.” 33) He said, “O Adam! Tell them their natures." When he had told them, Allah said: “Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heavens and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?” 34) And behold, We said to the angels, “Bow down to Adam” ; and they bowed down: not so Iblis: he refused and was haughty: he was of those who reject Faith (2: 30-4).

As I have said, the angels cannot be imaginary expressions of human intellect because no human beings existed when God was addressing the angels in verse 30. Now if the angels are imaginary forms expressing God’s higher intellect then things get deeply problematic when God says to them “I know what ye know not”. In other words, God knows things that are unknown to His higher intellect! But let’s solve that problem by saying that in God’s case the angels are imaginary expressions of His lower intellect. In this way “I know what ye know not” simply means that the higher divine intellect knows what the lower divine intellect does not know. But there is immediately another problem. Adam knows things that the angels do not know and so Adam knows things that are unknown to the All-knowing’s lower intellect! While anything is possible this is surely very convoluted and nor is that the end of it. God tells them, and this is just incredible, to bow down to Adam!!! To be fair, it is possible to picture God talking to Himself and ordering imaginary expressions of His lower intellect to bow down to a human being. What is utterly mysterious is why anyone would subscribe to such a theory! I think it best to rest our case and allow Sorosh to explain such verses in a way that is consistent with his theory that Gabriel is part of the Prophet’s intellect.

We ought to return to a point made right at the beginning of this chapter. What justifies Sorosh’s introduction of a new metaphysics? We have seen that there cannot be an aesthetic basis for it
because the traditional theory is at least as, if not more, aesthetically pleasing. Soroush’s new metaphysics of revelation is epitomized in the following quotation and our discussion has exposed the fact that it is desperately in need of some justification.

In sum, this matchless figure, with his wakeful heart, insightful eyes, perceptive mind and expressive tongue, was God’s creation and everything else was his creation and followed from his discoveries and his artistry. Muhammad was the book that God wrote and when Muhammad read the book of his being it became the Qur’an. And the Qur’an was the word of God. God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qur’an, just as God created the bee and the bee produced honey. And honey was the product of revelation... In other words, God simply sent the “teacher”; everything else revolved around his experiences and his reactions. This teacher was so well-equipped that he knew exactly what to do and what to say. And, of course, he was human, with all the moods and dispositions that a human being can have... At times, he was ecstatic and, at other times, he was despondent. At times, he would pitch his words at a lower level and, at other times, his words would soar. (Emphasis added)26

What is the justification for saying that Muhammad created the Quran like a bee produces honey? Soroush is saying that God did not directly create the Quran but that He created the creator of the Quran just as He created the producer of honey. The fact is that the Quran and honey are really creations of Muhammad and the bee respectively. What is the justification for this new metaphysics? We saw in the last chapter (Chapter 2: Section 1) that in order to make the phenomenon of revelation more intelligible to themselves, Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna inclined to a view that was metaphysically less burdensome than the traditional literalist view. They saw the angel not as a person but as a faculty or power. Clearly, economy in positing supernatural persons could be seen as an excellent way to lessen the metaphysical assumptions in the revelation narrative. Gabriel could be an impersonal faculty and God could be an impersonal Intelligence. Muhammad would be left as the only personal player in the saga of revelation and all to the good because he was indeed a historical person.

But in the last chapter we also saw that it is not at all clear that the theory of revelation offered by Muslim philosophers is metaphysically simpler than the traditional literalist view. The traditional view offers personhood as basic reality, the person of God being the ultimate basic reality. The persons of Gabriel and Muhammad are further manifestations of the basic reality of personhood. As a result, the traditional theory is actually metaphysically simple, with personhood being the only basic metaphysical postulate. The traditional theory has the advantage of being in harmony with a personal (as opposed to scientific) explanation of universal origins that is based on cosmological and teleological arguments that all rational Muslim theists must subscribe to.

In the last chapter, Avicenna was seen to suffer from the same basic malaise that afflicts some modernist interpreters of the Quran such as Rahman and Soroush. His problem was that his engagement with philosophy of religion leaves something to be desired. In modern times, perfect being theology has made a convincing case for a personal God because the ultimate explanation of the universe has to be a perfect being, and by virtue of its perfection such a being has to be a conscious free agent, that is, it has to be a person. Avicenna has the alibi that he lived at a time when he had to rely on the works of Hellenistic philosophers who were not working in the modern
analytic tradition, and who did not realize that they needed a personal being to solve the cosmo-
teoleological puzzle. So Avicenna thought it wise to posit an impersonal Intelligence in place of God
(and a faculty in place of Gabriel) even though this sent him into wild hermeneutical contortions
because in the Quran (as in the Old and New Testaments) God is a person who makes decisions,
feels emotion and, above all, talks like any other person. The point is that if Avicenna were to
embrace state-of-the-art perfect being theology and its claim that the perfect being is a person, he
would obviously then have no problem with the personhood of God and Gabriel. This is because his
up-to-date philosophy of religion would establish personhood as the basic simple of the universe. As
tings stand, his philosophy of religion is not up-to-date or systematically thought through, and this
is a problem that is shared by Quranic interpreters such as Rahman and Soroush.

As we have seen, Soroush also believes Gabriel to be a mere faculty or power. Moreover, like the
medieval philosophers, his view of God is clearly that of an impersonal being. For example, he does
not believe that God has personal characteristics such as speech.

Certainly, if we look at our traditions and the holy verses we will find that God speaks (“And
unto Moses, God spoke directly” – 4: 164), walks (“We shall advance upon what work they
have done” – 25: 23), gets angry (“when they had angered Us, We took vengeance on them”
– 43:), sits on a throne (“sat Himself upon the Throne” – 20: 5)... But if we are looking for the
truth, none of these things hold true about Him. The one who is speaking is, in fact,
Muhammad whose word has become identical to the word of God because of his closeness
to Him. The attribution of speech to God, like the attributions of other human characteristics
to Him, is to be taken metaphorically. They are not anthropomorphical.27

But Soroush is not merely restricting his view to the need to understand the language of the Quran
metaphorically when it describes God’s metaphysical nature. Rather, he believes that God’s will is
not the will of a person at all but is quite a different sort of thing.

Let me also add that, according to Islamic philosophy, God’s actions are not preceded and
caused by intentions, and it has been demonstrated elsewhere that it is impossible for God to
do anything to fulfill an objective or aim. God is not an agent with intentions. The idea that
He made a new decision from time to time, and then sent down a new verse in order to
achieve an aim or to explain something or to make something happen or to prevent
something from happening is absolutely out of the question. Although everything occurs
with God’s permission, with His knowledge and based on His will, He exercises His will in a
different way from human beings... The solution to all these problems is to see the Prophet’s
powerful and sanctioned being as the acting agent, the exerciser of intentions, the creator of
the verses and the formulator of the precepts: a being who is so powerful that he is God’s
caliph on earth, his hand is God’s hand, and his word is God’s word. And the Qur’an is his
miracle. (Emphasis added)28

Thus, Gabriel is not a person, ‘God is not an agent with intentions’ (that is, He is not a person either)
and Muhammad is the only person (or ‘acting agent, the exerciser of intentions, the creator of the
verses’). Obviously, an impersonal God does not write verses or prose or anything for that matter.
This is the minimalist metaphysics that Soroush’s humanist sensibilities can tolerate. And it is
precisely in this sense that his philosophy of religion seems hopelessly out of date. As already
explained in the first chapter, the perfect being of philosophy has to be a person, an agent with intentions. Once personhood is established as the basic simple of the universe, one’s theory of revelation need not hunt down every supernatural person in the revelation narrative.

2. Soroush on *Fiqh*: “Can we get a clean slate please?”

In Chapter 1 (sections 5-6), the natural epistemological limits in understanding the life and mind of God were outlined as a basic hermeneutical principle. In Chapter 2 (sections 6-8), this principle was applied against Rahman’s Kantian hermeneutics. As a rational Muslim theist, Rahman has to bear in mind that epistemic limits play the critical role in arriving at belief in God in the first place (they cause us to fall back onto deep psychology), and that such limits have to be respected in hermeneutics as well. The question of God’s existence fully engages the human mind, and it is not possible to give a positive answer to that question and blithely move on, as Rahman does, to the next question of what it is that God is thinking. There is a parallel here with Christian theology. It is not even possible to give a positive answer to the question of God’s existence let alone posit that there are three persons within His being. We are simply not in an epistemic position to enter secondary discussions either on His thought processes or His internal composition. In defiance of this, Rahman seems to say that he is certain what God is thinking and this assumes that he is also certain that God exists. This is not good philosophical method. As one cannot ascertain that God exists one surely cannot ascertain what He is thinking. Any theory about what God is thinking would have to be based on the same psychological principles that give us the rational belief that He exists for otherwise ideas of what He is thinking would be unjustifiably disconnected from reasons for His existence. Thus, as rational theists, our views on what God is thinking should not be based on the moral law *ala* Rahman but on the deep psychology of sufficient reason, simplicity, and trust. A hermeneutics based on these principles was outlined in Chapter 1 (Section 5).

Like Rahman, Soroush also has a strategy for overcoming epistemic limits. Where Rahman proposed that the Prophet had attained an intimate awareness of the moral law and that other individuals could follow him in this, Soroush believes that the Prophet’s spiritual experience was essentially a mystical one and that other mystics can follow him in this. Thus, while Soroush’s mystics do not become aware of Rahman’s moral law, they do make inner mystical contact with the source of the Prophet’s inspiration and thereby overcome epistemic limits in understanding the word of God. However, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, for Soroush any mystical contact is not of a single and authoritative kind in the way that Rahman’s awareness of the moral law certainly is. No mystic, including the Prophet, ever fully overcomes epistemic limits to arrive at the definitive meanings intended by God. Each is able to understand only some aspect of God’s meanings.

The allegory that Rumi recounts about a group of people trying to form an impression of an elephant in a dark space… is an extremely eloquent story… the hands of the people making contact with the elephant’s body in the dark… [are] not capable of grasping the full picture… mental perception as such is likewise limited. And as long as human beings are condemned to be human beings this sentence will apply. What Rumi is telling us is that we are all groping in the dark and that we will, therefore, never grasp reality in its entirety. Everyone sees it
and understands it to some extent and from a particular angle, and they describe it to exactly that extent.29

As I said at the beginning of the chapter and as the passage suggests, Soroush’s acknowledgement of epistemic limits and human fallibility leads him to an irreducible religious pluralism. While Soroush is clearly more respectful of epistemic limits than Rahman he still walks in the latter’s footsteps in offering a highly controversial and baseless conjecture regarding the revelation narrative. But contra Soroush, we simply have no way to ascertain that the Prophet’s spiritual experience was a mystical one, and one that another mystic could share. The Prophet and the Quran both insist that the spiritual experience in question was extra-terrestrial (E.T) rather than anything else. Their literal insistence (if it is to be respected) is that E.T. (aka Gabriel) visited the Prophet and will not visit anyone else after this. In other words, no mystic, however mystical, will share this experience. The Prophet and the Quran have outlined a revelation narrative according to which an illiterate ordinary Meccan businessman is chosen by God because of his impeccable truthfulness and trustworthiness (al-āmin) to convey a supercritical message from God to both human beings and the jinn. So let us at least be clear on what the good book says and then we can decide whether some other (‘reason-pleasing’) theory can be constructed on this simple narrative.

The reason that we have no independent access to the mind of God is a philosophical one. We cannot read God’s mind and neither Rahman nor Soroush can show us how such epistemic limits are to be overcome. Even the Prophet (if he is to be believed) did not read God’s mind but followed His instructions sent via Gabriel. The un-readability of God’s mind is a permanent feature of the human condition. The Prophet insisted that he was a human being and we should respect him in this by accepting that he was also afflicted with this permanent human limitation. He had to live a natural biological life within the confines of natural epistemological limits. While he knew and saw much more than we do, he never claimed to be in telepathic contact with God.

This sort of profound though traditional wisdom has established Islam as a religion that is defined around a set of sacred symbols. As we cannot know what God is thinking, we simply observe the symbols and commandments that He has given us. I will later also explain (Chapter 4) that the only way to submit to God is through an observance of His symbols and commandments (pp. 163-5). So the un-readability of God’s mind is the philosophical basis for insisting on the observance of symbols and commandments such as non-interest lending (2: 275-80), avoidance of alcohol (5: 90-1) and so on. The 14th century Andalusian jurist Abu Ishāq al-Shātibī (d. 790/1388) approaches the same issue from the perspective of jurisprudence but makes essentially the same point. He says that in some cases the Quran demands strict obedience (ta’abbud). Such is the case in ritual worship (‘ibādāt). This is because the reasons for (a specific form) of ritual worship are non-intelligible.30 For example, the reasons for offering prayer five times a day (as opposed to four) are non-intelligible. Try as you may, but there is no intelligible reason why that ritual should be that way. Thus, for Shātibī, the non-intelligibility of reasons is a jurisprudential basis for ta’abbud (strict obedience) that plays a role similar to the un-readability of God’s mind that is a philosophical basis for ta’abbud. Both are ways of expressing the limits of reason and the resulting fall back onto the simple text. In the language of Chapter 1, we should take the ‘ibādāt at face value (simplicity) because there can be no sufficient reason to do otherwise (because the rationale for the ritual is non-intelligible).
The un-readability of God’s mind and the non-intelligibility of His reasons give powerful philosophical and jurisprudential support for defining Islam around divine commandments such as religious government (8:39; 9: 29; 24: 55), strict heterosexuality (7: 81; 27: 55), non-interest lending (2: 275-80) and male responsibility for women (4: 34). Sorosh is unhappy with this rigid traditional hermeneutics and his primary strategy around the problem of ta’abbud is a theory of revelation that denies that the Quran was a verbal revelation and the very word of God. As the Quran is not the (very) word of God but rather that of Muhammad, and as Muhammad is merely a human being who had elevated mystical experiences that are in varying degrees shared by other mystics, there is really no problem of epistemic limits surrounding the symbols and commands of the Quran. We do not have to read God’s mind because it is Muhammad’s mind that authored the Quran. Contra Shātibi, the reasons for various symbols and commands are quite intelligible to mystics who have spiritual experiences similar to or even greater than the prophets.

Mulla Sadra (Sadr al-din Shirazi) recounts an interesting Shi’i narrative in his Mafatih al-Ghayb which conveys an elevated, mystical notion: “There are servants of God who are not prophets but rouse the envy of prophets.” In other words, there are people who have special links to the world beyond and it may well be that they achieve a loftier status than some of the names engraved in the annals of prophethood.31

Similarly:

Through their belief in the Imams of the Household of the Prophet, Shi’is have laudably embraced the fine point that the door has not been closed to valid and independent religious experiences, even after the Prophet’s demise, and that countless saints may appear and enrich religion with their experiences and discoveries. These saints (awliya) may even be of greater stature than some of the prophets (nabis) who have preceded them.32

I have already explained that Soroush’s view that mystics share in the Prophet’s revelatory experience is highly controversial and his appeal to the Shi’i tradition in no way reduces the controversy (Sunni Islam that comprises a significant majority of the world’s Muslims flatly denies that the Shi’i Imams have prophet-like experiences). But Sorosh’s view of the awliya (saints or guardians) and their status of being comparable to nabis (prophets) is part of his overall view that religion is subject to expansion through new experiences. Rather than being a static system of sacred symbols, religion evolves and expands with new religious and worldly experiences. In fact, religion was evolving and expanding even during the Prophet’s own lifetime.

In brief, the Prophet of Islam underwent two levels of “experience” and Islam is a product of both: outward experience and inward experience. Over time, the Prophet became more skilled at both these types of experience. Hence, his religion grew sturdier and more perfected. In his outward experience, he built the Medina, ran the city’s affairs, went to war, confronted enemies, cultivated friends and so on. In his inward experience, there was revelation, ascension, reveries, insights and illuminations, and in these, too, he continued to excel and grow increasingly skilled. And, until the actual demise of the Prophet of Islam, this religion, with these characteristics and this nature, continued to perfect and grow.33
Thus, even during the mission of the Prophet, his new outward and inward experiences were contributing to the increasing perfection of Islam. Moreover, the process through which Islam continually becomes increasingly perfect did not cease with the death of the Prophet.

For religion to become increasingly perfected, it is necessary for the Prophet himself to become increasingly perfected, for religion is nothing other than the condensed sum and substance of his individual and social experiences. Now, in the absence of the Prophet, too, the inward and outward prophetic experiences must expand and grow, thereby enriching and strengthening religion... The profound, spiritual experiences of Rumi, Al-Ghazali, Shaykh Mahmoud Shabestari, Seyyed Heidari Amoli and other mystics all have something to say and contribute, and they all add to the previous experiences... The experience of mystical love, for example, has been one of the tender spiritual experiences to have enriched believers’ religious practices. We can say much the same about Shi’i belief, which, by taking seriously the idea of religious leadership, has in effect opted for the expansion and perpetuation of prophetic experiences. And this is a precondition for the movement and perfection of a religion that came into being on the bedrock of movement and increasing excellence.34

It is not only that the inward religious experiences of mystics such as Rumi and al-Ghazali contributed to the perfection of Islam, it is also outward worldly experiences that continue to contribute to its evolution towards perfection.

Not only inward experiences, but social experiences, too, have contributed and can contribute to the feasible strengthening and perfection of religion. Through their political achievements, their familiarisation with other cultures, and their development of fiqh, theology and ethics, Muslims have in fact enriched religion and transformed it from a potentiality to an actuality. And as long as the way remains open to such experiences, religion will continue to grow sturdier and more perfected.35

But the idea that new religious leaders will advance Islam’s evolution to a complete and perfect religion directly contradicts Islam’s self-consciousness as a religion that was perfected by the Last Prophet in the 7th century. The following verse is one of the last Quranic verses (if not the last) to be revealed.

This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion (5: 4).

This verse poses a tremendous challenge to Sorroush’s hermeneutics because it plainly states that the day of its revelation is the day that Islam was perfected. This is parallel to Francis Fukuyama’s recent claim that liberal democracies represent the end of History. While historical events will continue as long as there are people in the universe, human beings will not discover a system of governance better than 20th century liberal democracy. In parallel, while historical events will continue to the Day of Judgment, the perfection and completion of Islam was attained in the 7th century before the Last Prophet passed away. How does Sorroush square this with his idea that new religious leaders are continually contributing to the perfection of Islam?
And the verse that says: “Today I have perfected your religion for you,” (5: 4) speaks of a minimum, not a maximum; that is to say, the people have been provided with a necessary minimum of guidance, whereas the feasible maximum will come about through the gradual perfection and historical expansion that Islam subsequently undergoes. We must bear in mind the subtle and important difference between “the necessary minimum” and “the possible maximum”.36

The perfection that verse 5: 4 refers to pertains to a minimal religion that offers minimal guidance, namely, the guidance to divine light and to life and accountability in the hereafter. In offering this minimal guidance, the Islam of 7th century Arabia is already perfect and complete. On that auspicious Arabian day in the 7th century, God had perfected and completed his minimal guidance to humankind. However, if it is maximal perfection that we seek then we must wait for the gradual evolution (expansion) of religion at the hands of new religious leaders that will follow in the Prophet’s footsteps until the Day of Judgment. Soroush’s interpretation is bold not only because it completely disregards the open declaration of 5: 4 on the final completion of God’s religion, but also because his interpretation creates other problems, for example, for the interpretation of other verses in the Quran.

The same religion (deen) has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus… (42: 13)

If 5: 4 is referring to the perfection merely of a minimal religion then why does it claim that this minimal religion was perfected one fine day in the 7th century? After all, that minimal religion was the same as the one possessed by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Why should we believe that they possessed an imperfect minimal guidance? After all, if all there is to this guidance is a calling to God and the hereafter, then why was such guidance not already perfect when it was in the hands of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Why must we wait for Muhammad in order to declare this minimal guidance perfected on an auspicious Arabian day in the 7th century? Verse 5: 4 is plainly referring to the day that God perfected His religion but the perfection of Soroush’s minimal guidance must have occurred millennia before that day when it was already in the possession of Noah, Abraham and the others. What is perhaps even more awkward for Soroush’s interpretation is that according to his own understanding the minimal religion was already in place during the first Meccan phase of the Prophet’s mission. What need then to wait for the Medinese period and the conquest of Mecca before finally declaring minimal religion to be complete? Why is this idea of perfection that ought to have been conveyed before the hijrat to Medina finally revealed in one of the last (if not the last) verses of the Quran? The obvious answer is that the Quran had involved itself in various social projects in Medina and during and after this Medinese phase it was still pronouncing final judgments on those social issues (e.g. alcoholism, interest, government etc.) As a result, we must believe that what was perfected on that day in the 7th century was not Soroush’s minimal guidance but rather something else, namely, religion (deen). It will be useful to get a sense of what the verse is referring to when it speaks of deen (root d-y-n).

According to Lane’s Arabic-English Lexicon37, the primary signification of the d-y-n is to obey, follow, submit, or become abased or enslaved. For example, Quran 4: 125 says, “… and who is better in obedience (root d-y-n) than he who submits (root s-l-m) himself to God”. Verse 9: 29 contains the
same root twice: “... nor follow [root $d-y-n$] the $deen$ [root $d-y-n$] of truth”, and in the second instance of its use $deen$ is usually translated simply as religion. However, according to Lane’s lexicon, $deen$ is said to have another primary signification. This latter signification is that of custom, habit, or manner of acting or conduct. As a result, $deen$ need not simply be translated as religion but rather as customs, habits, or a manner of acting or conduct. In other words, $deen$ can be translated as a system of conduct. In 3: 17, the word is clearly referring to just such a system: “The [true] $deen$ [root $d-y-n$] before God is Islam [root $s-l-m$]”. In other words, if we combine the two significations, the verse is saying that the true system of obedience or conduct before God is given by Islam. A derivative of the root $d-y-n$ is $madeen$ and when it occurs in 37: 53 and 56: 86 it could mean both ‘be reckoned with’ or ‘possessed under God’s authority’. The word $madeena$ means city and is so called because it is ‘had, or held, in possession, or under authority’. As a result, perhaps the basic meaning of $deen$ is a system of obedience or conduct for those held in possession or under authority. If that is so then $deen$ in 42: 13 is referring to the system of obedience or conduct given to Noah, Abraham and the others and also to Muhammad. The only difference in the case of the Last Prophet, as is revealed in 5: 4, is that this system has finally been perfected and completed. Thus, it is not merely a minimal system of belief and value that has been perfected $ala$ Soroush but rather a minimal system of belief, value, and conduct. In other words, what was perfected was a system of conduct based on age-old beliefs and values.

Soroush creates a false dichotomy between minimalist and maximalist conceptions of religion and in arguing vehemently against the maximalist conceptions he seems to be attacking a straw man.  

Most readers will be happy to grant him that it is quite obvious that religion cannot be maximal in the sense of possessing decrees for all the minutiae of life. As I said, maximal religion is merely a straw man. The real problem, and one that Soroush fails to address, is that while religion is minimal, this minimum that it offers has to be determined and set by someone. What is the minimum and who is going to set it? Is the Quran going to tell us what minimal guidance is or is Soroush going to tell us? In other words, it is common sense that religion does not offer maximal guidance but the minimal guidance that it $does$ offer has to be determined by the Quran and surely not by Soroush. Let us begin to look at this false maximal/minimal dichotomy in one of Soroush’s outpourings against the maximalist view.

> “Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion.” (5: 3) In other words, God has said that, one day, religion was completed. However, some people have taken “religion’s completeness” to mean “religion’s all-inclusiveness”... or failed to distinguish between minimalist perfection and maximalist perfection... There is a difference between “being complete” and being “all-inclusive”. All-inclusive means including everything, as if religion is a supermarket in which you can find anything. But “being complete” means that religion falls nothing short of its self-defined aim or its definition of itself or its own particular function in its own chosen field of action and concern... Religion is complete in relation to the purpose it was designed for (which is to offer minimal guidance, as we said). But it cannot be complete in relation to our every possible and imaginable expectation.  

As I said, Soroush is obviously right in saying that religion is not all-inclusive in the sense of offering guidance on every little issue that arises in life. He is obviously right in saying that the completeness
of religion has to be understood as a completeness vis a vis its own aims qua religion. But the problem is that he seems to expend too much energy attacking the maximalist conception to spare any thought for how the minimalist conception ought to be determined. So let’s get rid of the false dichotomy by openly embracing the fact that religion offers minimal guidance. We can now attend to the real question: what minimal guidance does it offer? The real question and one that Sorosh does not seem to get around to is: who has the authority to determine what the correct minimum is and by what method will they determine this?

Soroush’s final answer on the nature of minimal religion is conveyed through a highly controversial discussion on the essentials and accidentals of religion. In a nutshell, for him the essentials are belief in one God, accountability in the hereafter and the basic Prophetic aims of preserving reason, life, progeny, property and (minimal) religion. Everything else is accidental and not part of essential minimal guidance. The essence of Islam is defined by this minimal guidance and all its other symbols, rulings, commandments, etc. are accidental to it. Sorosh has every intention of generating a high degree of controversy because he intends to preserve only the spirit while transforming the entire body of Islam.

The simplest and least controversial consequence of this would be that the phrases used to seal a marriage or divorce would no longer have to be recited in Arabic, but – since they are accidentals – could equally be expressed in Persian or French... But the implications are much more profound than this. Transcending accidentals... would have many other rousing, revolutionary and liberating consequences, the discovery and expounding of which would herald a new order and a new paradigm in the discipline of fiqh.

Soroush means every word of this. The ‘rousing, revolutionary and liberating consequences’ that ‘herald a new order and a new paradigm’ are easily items such as legalizing homosexuality, interest, alcohol, pork and other things that currently define Islam as a cultural entity. For example, while the Quran forbids homosexuality (7: 81; 27: 55), there is no way of showing that a negative ruling such as this is essential to Islam. If the Quran had not forbidden homosexuality it would in no way have jeopardized the minimal guidance that essential Islam offers to humankind. Islam would continue to guide us to the one God and the hereafter. Why would anyone doubt that homosexuals can be believers? Nor is it essential that they be seen as wayward believers? It is certainly possible to imagine an Islam that treats homosexuals on par with heterosexuals. Arguably, if Muhammad had been born in the sexually liberated culture of 20th century America he may have tolerated or even accepted homosexuality as a norm. His birth in 7th century Arabia with its homophobic (tribal) culture is as much an accident of history as is his birth within the Arabian slave culture. Thus, homophobia, like slavery, is accidental to Islam. Sooner or later, either Sorosh or one of his elevated mystics ought to stumble upon this liberating insight (if they have not already done so and are being wisely circumspect about what to publish) and argue for legalizing homosexuality at least for Muslims in the West. Even the Prophetic aim of preserving progeny is in no way directly threatened by a sexually liberated culture. It would require a convoluted argument to demonstrate that homosexuality threatens global human procreation. Thus, Sorosh’s essential Islam could easily legalize homosexuality. In fact, as part of the modern project of secularising religion, it already refuses to acknowledge the applicability in modern times of the ancient rulings of Islamic fiqh.
Soroush believes that we must begin with a clean slate and solve our problems ‘using pragmatic and secular methods’.

People think about solving social problems and finding rational solutions to them in every corner of the world. There is no need to call this Islamic jurisprudence. And, if we are to proceed on this basis, then there is no need for us to perform the Islamic ablutions either; it will suffice if we act according to the dictates of the science of hygiene. In brief, this solution, intended to turn the minimalist into the maximalist, would completely wipe the issue out and reduce the role of fiqh to zero. Of course this is the natural consequence of the secularisation of religion in the modern age. But then it is no longer appropriate for them to tell us that we have a duty to perform divine precepts. They should say, we have a duty to do that which is rational and to solve individual and social problems using pragmatic and secular methods.45

So with Islamic fiqh reduced to zero (because it is accidental46) it is already the case that homosexuality is not illegal. To be clear, the problem is not at all that Soroush’s theory has plenty of shock value (which it obviously does). One is happy to go along with a shocking theory as long as it is well-founded. But on what foundations is Soroush building the idea that Quranic symbols and commandments are accidental? His foundations are that religion has to be viewed as minimal guidance. But as I have said, we already agree with this and it is actually quite obvious. Is Soroush going to say something beyond this because the real question is: what is the minimum and who is going to set it? Soroush says that the minimum is the invitation to God and the hereafter while the Quran says that the abolishment of interest, homosexuality etc. is included in the minimal guidance that it offers. Obviously, the Quran had neither the time nor space to offer detailed theses on commercial banking and/or sexual practices. As a result, it established basic ground rules for each sphere of activity, viz. no interest, no homosexuality. So the Quran is telling us to conduct business as we please as long as we (in the minimum or at the least) do not engage in interest based practices. Similarly, a ground rule for sexual arousal is that it must be achieved (in the minimum or at the least) by paying attention to the opposite sex (“Must ye need lust for men rather than women” (27: 55)). This is standard Quranic practice: set some minimal ground rules and let the horses play within those parameters. The Quran is not in any way concerned with micromanaging the horseplay. So the real problem for Soroush is not the maximalist (micromanaging) conception of religion that he spends far too much of his time and energy berating. Rather, his real problem is his disagreement with the Quran on what minimal guidance is. His real problem is that he gives us no method to judge between his minimalist theory (henceforth S-minimalism) and the Quran’s view of minimal religion (henceforth Q-minimalism).

Symbols and commandments play a critical role in Q-minimalism. At this point, it will be useful to remind ourselves of the order of conceptual priority in the Quran set forth in the last chapter (Chapter 2: Section 2). Conceptually, truth is first. Reason is second along with its concomitants of knowledge and understanding. Truth and reason, or more specifically, a rational exploration of the truth gives us belief in Allah. So Allah is third. This is because truth and reason establish the basic conceptual framework through which Allah is discovered. Once it is discovered that belief in Allah is rational, we bring into our practical lives the All-knowing and All-powerful being. Now that we are face to face with an irresistible being, it immediately follows that we must submit to Him and this
means that we must follow His commandments and observe any symbols (of submission) that He gives us (see pp. 161-3).\textsuperscript{47} Consider examples such as that of Zachariah who was given a divine symbol, namely, that he should not speak to anyone for three days. Similarly, Muslims were given the inviolable symbol to pray five times a day. When Satan did not attend to the symbol of bowing down to Adam, God consigned him to eternal damnation (see pp. 163-5). So this is simply a question of personal salvation. Ask any believer, as soon as we believe, we submit.\textsuperscript{48} This is why if Allah is the third conceptual priority of the Quran, then the priority that immediately follows is to submit to His commandments and symbols. So once we realize that it is rational to believe in Allah, the first order of business (and thus the fourth conceptual priority of the Quran) is to observe His symbols and commandments. Fifth on the list of conceptual priorities could be social morality.\textsuperscript{49}

In our identity as philosophers, our journey begins with truth and reason. On the way, we discover that truth and reason enable us to discern the superiority of theism over atheism in a discussion whose provenance is philosophy of religion. We then continue the journey by comparing conceptions of the deity in the Abrahamic tradition and discover that truth and reason enable the discernment of the superiority of Allah over other conceptions in a discussion whose provenance is comparative religion. But as I have said in the last paragraph, by the time we finally arrive at this belief in Allah and at our final identity as rational theistic Muslims we have already embraced a being with such irresistible metaphysical credentials that there is nothing to do at this point but to submit to His authority. This authority is represented by divinely sanctioned symbols and divinely issued commandments. Through his theory of revelation, Soroush tries but fails to show that these symbols and commandments are not directly divine but rather actually human. Through his theory of religious minimalism, he tries but fails to show that these symbols and commandments no longer apply (we look at this point below in greater detail). As a result, he is leading his small band of followers into the sea with the hope that rational Muslim theists will one day abandon divine symbolism or even a single divine symbol. To be fair, Soroush does offer a rationale as to why divine symbols no longer apply. His rationale is that human knowledge has undergone such a radical transformation in the last few centuries that the divine symbols are simply out of date.

The new world is the world of new theoretical concepts, not new practical problems! The world is perceived differently today in the light of new scientific and philosophical discoveries. The most important achievement of the modern era is not its technology; it is its science and rationality... In the light of this science and rationality, phenomena are interpreted and understood differently, because phenomena are intertwined with theories and theory-laden. Human relationships, too, have now come under the new concepts and norms and, consequently, taken on new meanings. These are the elements that make up the modern world’s structure and principles, not things like using aircraft instead of mules and camels or artificial insemination or travelling to the moon. And if there is a need for \textit{ijtihad} it is in the realm of harmonising religion’s first principles with the first principles of the modern world, not harmonising religion’s secondary regulations with the derivative regulations and by products of the modern world... New legal problems have come about not just because of the development of new human capabilities and new technological tools, but much more so because of the emergence of new assumptions about and approaches to ethics, humanity, history, rationality, knowledge, rights, society and God, and the discovery of new sciences. And solving the new legal problems hinges on solving the new fundamental theoretical and
philosophical problems... A faqih who is unfamiliar with the assumptions people make today about the above-mentioned topics will not be able to understand and solve the concomitant legal problems either.50

Soroush’s false maximal/minimal dichotomy and his inability to identify Q-minimalism, creates the confusion evident in the passage above. For example, a direct implication of Soroush’s view is that the Quran cannot forbid homosexuality in the 21st century because in doing so it would be overstepping its juridiction. This is because the legality of homosexuality in the 21st century is not something for the Quran but rather for modern scientific theory and philosophy to determine. But the point Soroush fails to see is that in setting basic ground rules such as forbidding homosexuality, the Quran is not at all challenging modern theoretical and philosophical knowledge. The Quran’s purpose is to channel deep and powerful biological drives such as the urge for sexual arousal into limited avenues of expression. What, if anything, does this purpose have to do with modern theoretical and philosophical advances? Are modern human beings less sexually aroused because of those advances? Common sense and important philosophers (e.g. Foucault) suggest the opposite, viz. that the bewildering pace of change has led to greater possibilities for arousal. It would then appear that the Quran is more not less applicable to modern times. This is because it is promulgating on the subject of basic instinctive drives. Like Shakespeare’s Othello that revolves around themes of love and jealousy, the Quran revolves around instinctive themes that do not go out of fashion. As a neo-Darwinist, Soroush must already know that evolutionary changes in human nature could conceivably occur over millions of years but certainly not in the 1400 years since Muhammad’s time.51 For example, has human evolutionary change resulted in modern folks that are less prone to get drunk when they imbibe alcohol? The Quran would indeed be out of its juridiction (as Soroush repeatedly points out) if it had offered a maximalist religion that aimed to discourse on, say, modern sociological theory. But the Quran does not aim to do this. Rather, it promulgates on charity, modesty, greed, lust, basic physical and psychological differences between the sexes, etc. and this is obviously within its jurisdiction until the next stage of human evolution (in a few million years or so?).

To be more specific using the earlier example, there are a set of Quranic rules that channel the sexual drive into limited forms of expression. These rules are that premarital sex, extramarital sex, and homosexuality are forbidden. Why this need to block avenues of arousal? Arousal is seen as a Pandora’s box that, once opened, has no limit to the scenarios in which it must seek gratification. This is not dissimilar from greed that also has no limit and is restrained by a set of Quranic rules that forbid usury, interest, and hoarding. In both cases, the opposite virtues are demanded, namely, chastity, marital fealty, and fair profit. Entertainment is another industry that exhibits the unending need for change, novelty, and innovation (although the basic themes of love, justice, humour, goodness, anger, vengeance, madness, evil etc. do not change). Once freedom of expression is granted, human nature cannot rest content with old forms of expression and the basic desire to be entertained cannot be fulfilled without change, novelty, and innovation. In the same way, the basic desire is for arousal but once sexual freedoms are granted it is not possible to be aroused without changing the scene, the players, the power dynamics etc. Foucault’s own life bears partial witness to the insatiable appetite for new scenarios of dominance and submission that may lead to sadomasochism, death and torture in the unending search for arousal. Private husband-wife sexual interactions can give way and have given way to a kaleidoscope of sexual explorations that spill over
into the public realm and represent a powerful force easily capable of undermining society. This is not the case of an alarmist religious right attitude towards sexual freedom. It is really a question of taking a cold hard look at the human psyche. However, the point being made is that Soroush is on very shaky ground when he suggests that Quranic rulings are no longer pertinent in such matters. Both sides of the debate may be hard pressed to produce evidence on whether the Quranic rulings are pertinent, but a stalemate will work against Soroush because it gives him no sufficient reason to displace a simple reading of ancient Quranic symbols and commandments.  

3. Soroush on Democratic Religious Government

When Iqbal said, “With the onset of rationality, the era of prophethood came to an end,” he did not intend to suggest any opposition between rationality and prophethood. What he meant was that the era of personal guardianship has come to an end and that collective rationality will henceforth serve as the collective sovereign, guardian and guiding light for us all.  

The italicized phrase at the end is not so much an accurate interpretation of the Indian philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal as it is an open declaration of the absolutely critical role that collective rationality has in Soroush’s worldview.

*We demand reasons from everyone, our collective reason is the arbiter over everyone and everything,* and no one can bind us to a ruling merely on the strength of their own religious experience.  

Soroush believes that democracy, justice, and human rights have independent foundations in collective reason. Collective reason is ‘the arbiter over everyone and everything’ and it is the values, practices, and institutions that it gives rise to that illuminates our religious understanding.

Whether we consider democracy as a successful method to delimit power, attain justice, and achieve human rights or as a value that tacitly embraces all those objectives, it is the religious understanding that will have to adjust itself to democracy not the other way around; justice, as a value, cannot be religious. It is religion that has to be just. Similarly, methods of limiting power are not derived from religion, although religion benefits from them. In any case the question of whether or not democracy has the above advantages can only be decided outside religion, prior to its acceptance, and as a prelude to its understanding. The same reasoning holds for the relationship of religion and human rights, which is – not unlike the debate on free will – a theological and metareligious argument that influences the understanding and acceptance of religion.

As indicated in the passage above, collective reason passes judgment on religion and its laws and neither can be considered rationally acceptable if they are not in harmony with it.

*It is reason that defines truth, justice, public interest, and humanity, that attributes these properties to a particular religion (or else it would not become a rationally acceptable religion), and that undertakes the task of understanding the teachings of religion.* In these
Given the centrality of it, we must ask: what are the foundations of collective reason? To know Soroush’s answer to this question we need to have a view of his meta-ethics. Why do many people choose to value democracy, justice, and human rights? If many people did not value these things then collective reason would not give a basis for them. Clearly, Soroush is right in saying that many people value them. Our question is why, and answering it will give us insight into the foundations of collective reason.

Soroush’s meta-ethics are straightforward but suffer from a fatal lack of depth. He announces the supermoral (meta-ethical) principle that the existing morality is the only morality that there is. There is no higher morality, or at least fallible human beings cannot be concerned with higher morality.

Since I surmise that some readers are still inclined to invoke moral commandments as omnipresent, impermeable tyrants demanding obedience from life, I should like to reiterate: Do not be distracted by such thoughts. That kind of morality is but an impossible dream, a chimera... Therefore, there is no higher morality than the existing morality... It behooves us, fallible creatures, to act as fallible creatures not as infallible gods. One should leave God’s work, God’s morality, and God’s affairs to God. This is the meaning of reliance on God (tavakkol).

Soroush believes that we must pay attention only to the exception-bound moral rules that are currently operating in society and any search for a higher morality is (from an epistemological standpoint) a complete and absolute waste of time. But the problem is that without any higher morality an exception-bound rule such as truth-telling (exception-bound because there are times when one should not tell the truth) could conceivably get inverted and the exception could turn into the norm. In other words, society could gradually or suddenly find itself in circumstances where the norm of lying is of superior life-preserving value (as could be the case in a very corrupt society). In other words, lying not truth-telling could become the exception-bound moral rule! Soroush is deeply sensitive to this possibility that our existing morality could be turned on its head and this motivates him to offer his final supermoral (meta-ethical) principle.

What saves morality from such a death trap is a supermoral principle that installs the exception-bound rules of morality as the very foundation of morality, so they will never decline or relax. In other words, there is no morality higher and more accurate than the existing morality. There is no higher altar of ideal morality in which to sacrifice the actual morality. A society in which moral exceptions have become rules is, by definition, an immoral and wicked society. In other words, justice, wisdom, moderation, and courage have no embodiments other than the prevalence of these moral rules; wherever the lantern of
these rules is extinguished, the light of those virtues will be dimmed. For those virtues are not to be found in a higher world. All these arguments and locutions have but one referent: appeal to a certain kind of morality that is indispensable for this world and without which everything will be lost. 58

Soroush’s solution eliminates any threat that the exception could turn into the norm because his solution is to make the existing exception-bound moral rules ‘the very foundation of morality’. In other words, such moral rules as currently exist in society define morality itself. If society deviates from these rules then it is deviating from morality itself. These existing rules cannot be inverted to give way to a new morality because these rules define what it is to be moral in the first place and so any deviation from them can no longer claim to be moral. Given that existing morality is supermorality, any deviation from it will raise the red flag that morality is being compromised.

This is a fine solution on paper, and it would be a fine solution in practice if Soroush could offer a reason for others to accept it. As things stand, Soroush is himself in an immense debt of gratitude that many people follow exception-bound moral rules. He is not fully clear on why they do this but he thinks it is a wonderful resource that must be guarded with life (‘without which everything will be lost’). It is as though he has discovered a treasure of gold and values it so much that he declares the treasure to be sacred. For Soroush, morality as it exists is a sacred resource. But the question that naturally comes to mind is: where did the gold come from or where does human morality come from? Because Soroush shows no particular interest in exploring this question, most people will not show any particular interest in his solution (of declaring existing morality a sacred treasure without concern from whence it came). If the raging millennia-old meta-ethical debate on why human beings are moral is anything to go by, people will not be content to simply forget about the ultimate sources or foundations of existing morality just because Soroush has had the bright idea that existing morality is itself its own foundation! For himself, Soroush is deeply content that people are moral, and he feels that this is a tremendous blessing.

Gold is a rare metal; but it is not as if the nature of gold requires scarcity. That is a result of the specific geological conditions of the earth. It is entirely possible that in another planet gold is more plentiful than copper without any disastrous consequences! In any event, ethicists inevitably harbour sociological and psychological assumptions such as the following: “The world produces human beings who are actually inclined to form social systems in which traits such as truthfulness, fulfilling promises, generosity to friends, and tolerance of enemies are better matched with the rest of the social system. They make life easier and more enjoyable by contributing to the order, stability, and balance of the society and by facilitating the attainment of positive ends,” ...the current science of ethics is a discipline for humanity as it is, not as it could be. Analogously, the current science of physics belongs to the existing world not to every possible world, which is why its theories are not logically necessary and timeless. 59 (Emphasis added)

So the Earth could have had more or less gold. In any event, it is a tremendous blessing that this is a planet with sufficient moral resources to build ordered societies and we need to preserve and apply those resources with utmost care. The science of ethics is concerned with ‘humanity as it is’ and, fortunately, as things stand, humanity is moral. I do not think that we should digress with a discussion on the sociological assumption of the ethicists that ‘the world produces human beings
who are actually inclined to form social systems in which traits such as truthfulness,... make life easier and more enjoyable by contributing to the order, stability, and balance of the society'. But what about this very same assumption of the ethicists, except this time let us consider it when it is made from a psychological standpoint (as stated in the passage above)? Does the world really produce individuals that are psychologically inclined to form stable social systems in which truth-telling is a virtue? Ethicists can make this assumption by simply ignoring their foundational discipline of meta-ethics. Needless to say, the assumption brims with optimism about human nature. The problem for Soroush is that if the world does not produce such individuals then his sacred existing morality is a rapidly dwindling resource and, if he wants to replenish it, he is going to have to discover from whence it came. His strategy of rejecting higher morality is akin to burning his boats. In order to hold onto his existing morality, Soroush has to hope that Joseph Conrad got things seriously wrong in the Heart of Darkness. But the meta-ethical question is to ask whether Conrad got it right or wrong? Soroush comes across as content with the hope that Conrad is wrong because he does not engage the meta-ethical issue on the reality of human nature. This is despite the fact that he offers detailed accounts of historical instances when things have gone seriously wrong.

Soroush’s focus on collective reason at the expense of individual reason and his lack of interest in the dynamic between the two is a fatal error in his theory. It is acceptable to believe that collective reason grounds the value of social justice but this is only because many individuals are willing to march for this value. The question of whether the percentage of such individuals is on the increase is a sociological one but the question of whether any given individual ought to defend this value is a meta-ethical one. The relationship between individual and collective reason is that if it is rational for an individual to uphold this value then he/she will join the ranks of those who do, and individual and collective reason will be in harmony because both uphold social justice. However, if an individual does not find it rational to uphold this value then individual and collective reason will break apart and collective reason will have no traction with the individual. But why on Earth would the individual not uphold the value of social justice? This is precisely the meta-ethical issue. The reason that an individual would not uphold justice is that he/she would reap more personal gain by being unjust. It is personal gain versus social justice, individual interest versus collective welfare. A person who jumps over the subway turnstile instead of paying for a ticket serves individual rather than collective interest. The meta-ethical problem is that, all things considered, it could be rational for this individual to cheat the system and ride for free. This is the famous free-rider problem and, famously, it does not have a solution. Famously, Jesus had to deal with government officials (e.g. tax collectors) who were corrupt. Now, a couple of millennia later, can we say that government officials are less corrupt? Corruption benefits the individual and could thus be a rational strategy for the individual even though it may be harmful for the collective. The free-rider problem is that it pays the individual to cheat the collective, in other words, injustice pays and it will always pay. The meta-ethical question is whether individual reason grounds justice and if the answer is negative then it will not matter if justice is a superior value from the collective standpoint. This is because collective reason will have no traction with the individual. Jesus’ final solution to the free-rider problem was a religious one. But Soroush has already burnt his boats by declaring that solution to be ‘an impossible dream, a chimera’.

As already explained, Soroush prioritizes collective reason over religion and religious understanding. We should now clearly see that the problem with this is that collective reason may have insufficient
traction with the individual and the role of religion in giving moral commandments to the individual cannot simply be undermined. What is surprising is that Soroush prioritizes collective reason over religion in spite of his deep sensitivity to the fact that religion appeals directly to individual reason.

Faith is a matter of exclusively personal and private experience. We embrace a faith individually just as we confront our death individually. We have communal actions and rituals, but not communal faiths. Expressions of faith are public but the essence of faith is mysterious and private. The domain of faith is akin to the arena of the hereafter, where people are brought in individually: “And everyone of them is brought to the day of judgment individually”60

The point against Soroush is that it is religion and not collective reason that has traction with the individual. If collective reason is seen to persuade the individual to be just then in all likelihood it is drawing on some deeper moral resource that it invariably fails to acknowledge. Spirituality/religiosity ground individual morality in a way that collective reason cannot. Psychologically, it is the individual’s (spiritual) awe of the mysterious unknown that reins in an otherwise insatiable self-interest. This is why Soroush’s tremendous faith in collective reason seems to be misplaced. For him, collective reason grounds justice, democracy, and human rights and any religious understanding that fails to accept these values is simply irrational. Thus, collective reason dictates these extra-religious values to religion, and this forces religion to retreat to an S-minimalist conception.

Justice, then, is a metareligious category, and the right and acceptable religion should, inevitably, be just. The same is true of other categories such as discovery and derivation of methods of just government, distribution and restriction of power, and the specific instances of human rights... All of the above issues have, primarily and logically, a rational – not a religious – origin. Religion (in itself) and religious understanding (religion for us) rely on these rational precepts. Once the status of reason, particularly the dynamic collective reason, is established; once the theoretical, practical, and historical advances of humanity are applied to the understanding and acceptance of religion; once extrareligious factors find an echo within the religious domain; and finally, once religion is rationalized, then the way to epistemological pluralism – the centrepiece of democratic action – will be paved.61

The view that justice, democracy, and human rights are grounded in collective reason is one that makes liberal democracy possible. Soroush insists that no religion is needed to discover these values, and if he is right then liberal democracy is a viable enterprise with no dependence whatsoever on religion. This could be an acceptable conclusion if Soroush had arrived at it after actually considering the opposite view. The opposite view is as ancient as religion itself and claims that human beings need religion for guidance. Soroush follows in the footsteps of 18th century secularists who also discovered the wonderful treasure of moral values in their societies and, without being concerned from whence it came62, declared that they had all the moral resources necessary for the founding of secular states. Things actually went quite well for so long as these secularists could mine the rich moral reserves of the Christian tradition (with little or no acknowledgement of their debt) but the popular divorce with Christian culture during the course of the 20th century has resulted in unprecedented social decay and this has left many secularists scratching their heads. We do not have the space to indulge in a discussion of these matters but Soroush would need to do so if he is
eager to state his conclusion that justice, just government (democracy), and just (human) rights have no dependence on religion.

The reason that religion does not find its rightful place in Soroush’s worldview has to do in large part because of his imperfect grasp of the distinction between theoretical and practical reason. Theoretically, the case for the claim that collective reason grounds justice could be seen as a strong one. This is because when people get together for collective planning there is a good chance that they will agree on principles of social justice because this gives everyone a level playing field to reap the benefits of social life. Practically, however, the case is not strong at all. When it comes to practice, individual self-interest often overrides the aims of collective rationality. In this sense, attention to practical reason with its focus on the motivations of the individual could serve as a reality check for any theoretical mystic.

Soroush’s understanding of the theoretical/practical distinction also fails to stand him in good stead when he makes an epistemological distinction between scientific certitude and religious certitude. Basically, from an epistemological standpoint the metaphysics of religion is beyond the reach of reason because it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. Because of this fact, liberal democracy does not privilege the metaphysics of one religion over any other and so it is characterized by irreducible religious pluralism. But from the same epistemological standpoint the theories of science are well within reach because they are verifiable and falsifiable. As a result, liberal democracy is characterized by scientific certitude but not religious certitude.

Liberal philosophers consider metaphysical arguments unverifiable and unfalsifiable. Consequently, they deem controversy over the truth or falsehood of religious beliefs futile and interminable. They point to the permanence, doctrinal rigidity, and plurality of divergent religious practices as historical evidence. Therefore, they advocate peaceful coexistence of a multiplicity of belief systems... However, let’s remind ourselves that these same liberal societies... will never relinquish the reins of decision making concerning lucid and well-examined affairs to the popular whim... No liberal government would base its modern technology upon the Aristotelian physics or re-examine such obsolete theories as the Flogeston theory of combustion... In the meantime, a colourful assortment of religious creeds is allowed to multiply and spread. In other words, although the state in liberal governments stays neutral toward religious claims, it does not remain impartial concerning scientific achievements. It is true, then, that the liberal society is no longer a religious society but a scientific one.63

Soroush says that the scientific certitude of liberal democracies is based on the unassailable epistemological status of science, a status that religion can never aspire to.

Science, however fallible as a human achievement, has been so well elaborated, thanks to courageous and free human critique and refinement, that it has attained an unassailable status... If in these societies religion is not an equal partner with science, it is... because liberalism... does not recognize science and religion as analogous bodies of knowledge. And this is established epistemologically, not through popular vote.64
We should happily grant that scientific knowledge has a superior epistemological status compared to religious knowledge and that the difference has to do with the basic nature of science and religion. But Soroush gives far too much importance to this difference and fails to acknowledge that ‘courageous and free human critique and refinement’ has occurred in both science and religion. The liberal claim that the various religions are epistemologically on par is simply unwarranted. As a non-random example, consider Islam’s claim of the superior authenticity of its original sources. Both the Quran and the Prophet’s mission entered the world under the intense critical gaze of publicly recorded history. From a purely epistemological standpoint, it would be an appalling lack of historical discernment to say that Islam is on par with Confucianism or Judaism in terms of the authenticity of its account of human contact with a higher existence. Moreover, the fact of the matter is that human psychology and practical reason play very similar roles in the acceptance of both scientific and religious theories. The psychology of logic, sufficient reason, and simplicity are primarily responsible for the tremendous progress of science and it is precisely this psychology that is the basis for the acceptance of one religious theory over another. To continue with our non-random example, the Islamic conception of God is superior from the standpoint of logic, sufficient reason, and simplicity when it is compared to Christian or Hindu conceptions. The nature of scientific and religious reasoning is not as far apart as Soroush and the liberal philosophers that he refers to make them out to be. Scientific reasoning is both theoretical and practical and the same holds true of religious reasoning. The difference between science and religion has more to do with method, falsifiability, and verifiability than it does with the nature of reasoning. Soroush betrays an imperfect grasp of the distinction between theoretical and practical reason and the nature of reason in science and religion.

As we saw earlier, Soroush’s view that all the prophets including the last one came with the ‘same basic message’, and that they merely renewed the application of this basic message to their particular time and place, leads him to an irreducible religious pluralism. The various religions are merely historical applications of the ‘same basic message’ and so there is no reason to believe that we can rank them in order of superiority. We have now seen that his view of the unassailable epistemological status of science and the poor epistemological status of religious metaphysics leads him once again to the same result, namely, irreducible religious pluralism.

Each religion invokes a different god and each claims a monopoly on the truth. How is the knowledge concerning their truth or falsehood to be obtained? How can we establish what God exactly expects from us? Once again, governments should be neutral towards various religions. Governments and regulators of public affairs ought to concentrate on preserving people’s common rights and leave theological issues to the citizens’ private and inner lives. Thus even if governments are still concerned with the questions of truth or falsehood of different religions and the supposed rights of God, they should remain impartial, guaranteeing the freedom and security of the contest of opinions, while scrupulously maintaining the separation of politics and religion.

Soroush’s final solution for religious society is not liberal democracy but rather religious democracy. However, as is clear in the passage above, this religious democracy is characterized by an irreducible religious pluralism. The state accepts all religions on par. This is because the religion of the state is a minimal religion (so it is not a secular state) that by its nature must be accepting of the
various historical applications of minimal religion in the form of Hinduism, Judaism etc. Soroush feels that it is a wonderful bonus for democracy to be able to draw strength from the moral resources of minimal religion. As explained earlier, he does not believe that collective reason has any need for religion but he feels that the moral resources of minimal religion are an excellent complement to collective reason in establishing justice, democracy, and human rights. This is because minimal religion is one of the bulwarks of existing morality.

... sympathetic voices are beginning to call for a return to virtues in such societies, for no civilization has survived without them. It is here that the great debt of democracy to religion is revealed. Religions, as bulwarks of morality, can serve as the best guarantors of democracy... Some two hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville understood this. “Although religion has no direct role in the government of the American society”, he observes, “it should be considered among the basic foundations of the political system of the country.” Of course, he did not mean that religion is identical with politics but that “religion in the United States guides morality” and morality is the best bulwark of democracy. Tocqueville considered egotism, extreme individualism, excessive preoccupation with one’s own family and friends at the expense of the public good deleterious to American democracy, which, he believed, owed its political success to the essentially religious and moral belief that all are responsible to the society and thus forbidden from drilling holes of self-interest in the collective vessel of felicity.68

Thus, collective reason grounds the values of justice, democracy, and human rights while minimal religion contributes considerable resources of existing morality. Minimal religion plays a vital role in forbidding the people ‘from drilling holes of self-interest in the collective vessel of felicity’. The combination of collective reason and minimal religion also gives us Soroush’s ideal polity for an Islamic society, namely, Islamic democracy. But this vision is open to two serious criticisms. First, as discussed earlier, if a rational theistic Muslim subscribes to minimalism then it will be Q-minimalism and not S-minimalism. As explained earlier, Muslims will feel compelled to observe the commandments and symbols in the Quran. Such obedience must include following the commandments for religious government (8: 39; 9: 29; 24: 55) that clearly do not have the time of day for irreducible religious pluralism. Any notions of tolerance, democracy and human rights will have to be in accordance with Q-minimalism. For example, human rights can never include gay rights.69 As another example, democracy will only find a place for itself if it can be shown to be in harmony with Q-minimalism rather than something that is dictated to religion by collective reason. Collective reason is subordinate to Q-minimalism and can only operate within its limits. Thus, democracy would have to be introduced as a reform within Q-minimal religion and the intra-religious precepts of consultation (shurā) and consensus (ijmā).70 This goes dead against Soroush’s wish to see an independent, extra-religious discussion on justice, democracy, human rights, and pluralism set the standard for what is acceptable in religion and religious understanding. As a result, while Soroush’s final solution is 1 it very quickly slides into 2 because S-minimalism is not a viable position for a rational theistic Muslim.


2. Collective Reason + Q-minimalism= Tolerance not Pluralism + Q-minimal Democracy (if at all?)+ Q-minimal Human Rights
The second criticism of Soroush’s vision of Islamic democracy is that even if we grant that S-minimalism is a consistent position within Islam, it still creates a serious problem. We have already seen that collective reason needs to be grounded in individual reason and that spirituality/religion would have to play the critical role in shoring up individual morality. The question is: can S-minimal religion shore up individual and thereby collective reason/morality. Both ancient and contemporary philosophers such as Aristotle (ancient) and John McDowell (contemporary) have emphasised the critical role of upbringing for individual morality. A moral upbringing requires that children grow up in a moral environment so that the flames of their natural drives are not fanned by a permissive society. The natural desires of both children and adults should not be given free reign by their environment because such desires have no limits. Soroush is himself quite sensitive to this point.

The religious denunciation of wealth and power can provide a suitable setting for a peaceful life, ameliorate the clash over material interests, and encourage rational measures that would curtail the alluring accumulation of temptations of riches and power that may test the rectitude of hearts and faiths, enticing them to throw dust in virtue’s eyes and renounce right for the sake of might. Democracy grows and prospers better on such a soil. So long as the moral values do not find a practical and disciplined form and an effective method of application, so long as they remain mere words they will be sterile, even corrupting.71

However, the problem is that such passages are quite rare in Soroush’s work. While he is absolutely certain that the external tyranny of coercion and compulsion in matters of faith prevents the exercise of human free choice, he spends much less time and energy worrying (as he worries in the rare passage above) about the internal tyranny of unchecked desires that also clearly prevent the exercise of freedom of choice. It is clear that his main target is the external tyranny of coercion and compulsion.

One may use coercion in enforcing religious regulations, but how can one inculcate faith? Is action without conviction, body without soul, appearance without essence worth all the torments and sacrifices of the prophets? ...They radiated, like sunshine, upon hearts and let the inner heat glow through frosted limbs. There interlocutors were ardent hearts, their method was enchantment, the outcome of their mission was consensual faith, not fearful obedience. They knew themselves and explicitly told their interlocutors: “How can we compel you, while you are reluctant?”72

The last question in quotes is from the Quran but Soroush seems insensitive to its double meaning. The question draws attention not only to the fact that the prophets did not compel their audience to follow them which is the external tyranny of compulsion that Soroush is highly sensitive to. It also draws attention to the fact the many people in the audience were reluctant, and while the prophets are declaring that they cannot compel, they are at the same time complaining that many in their audience are reluctant. This reluctance has to do with an inner lack of will to follow the right path that is most often caused by an attachment to the ways of the world, in other words, to the internal tyranny of desire. If the prophets coerce and compel it is their mistake, but if the people are reluctant whose fault is that? Earlier in the passage, Soroush speaks out against coercion and compulsion bemoaning that ‘action without conviction, body without soul, appearance without essence’ cannot be worth the sacrifices of the prophets. The point is that on the whole he is far less
worried about conviction without action, soul without body, and essence without appearance and this is why he is able to propose S-minimalism as his final interpretation of Islam.

A seemingly religious society that lacks faith is an oyster without the pearl, a face without the soul, an appearance without the essence. It is neither desired by the prophets nor envisioned by the wise.73

But what about the pearl that is without an oyster? Does that not convey the image of a valuable thing that has been left unprotected? Is S-minimal faith not like the pearl that is without the protective covering of a solid set of rules and regulations that guard the faith? Is the S-minimal faith of both children and adults who live in permissive societies well-guarded, or is it rather a faith that is naked without the symbols and commandments of the Quran? Does the ban on hoarding, usury, and interest serve to control greed? Does the ban on alcohol and drugs serve to control waywardness? Does the abolishment of pre-marital/extra-marital sex and homo-sexuality serve to control lust? And are these controls on the internal tyranny of desire in any way linked to the preservation of human free choice? I do not believe that Soroush even begins a serious exploration of these issues. Hope lies in the fact that he is actually sensitive to them.

... it is also true of all religious societies that, if the husk of religiosity deteriorates, the core will sooner or later perish and religion will wither away, except in rare circles of the wise. Through protection of the outward appearances, the fragrance of religion will reach even the weakest of nostrils and the faithful will gain a better insight into their religious existence and identity.74

4. Rida, Būṭī, and the Liberal-Conservative Spectrum

The reason that we have no independent access to the mind of God is a philosophical one. We cannot read God’s mind and Soroush’s mysticism fails to convince us that such epistemic limits can be overcome. Even the Prophet did not read God’s mind but followed His instructions sent via Gabriel. The un-readability of God’s mind is a permanent feature of the human condition. The Prophet insisted that he was a human being, and so he had to live a natural biological life within the confines of natural epistemological limits. While he knew and saw much more than we do, he never claimed to be in telepathic contact with God. This sort of profound though traditional wisdom has established Islam as a religion that is defined around a set of sacred symbols. As we cannot know what God is thinking, we simply observe the symbols and commandments that He has given us. I will later also explain that the only way to submit to God is through an observance of His symbols and commandments (pp. 161-3). So the un-readability of God’s mind is the philosophical basis for insisting on the observance of symbols and commandments such as non-interest lending (2: 275-80), avoidance of alcohol (5: 90-1) and so on. Shātibī approaches the same issue from the perspective of jurisprudence but makes essentially the same point. He says that in some cases the Quran demands strict obedience (taʿabbud). Such is the case in ritual worship (ʿībādāt). This is because the reasons for (a specific form) of ritual worship are non-intelligible.75 For example, the reasons for offering prayer five times a day (as opposed to four) are non-intelligible. Try as you may, but there is no intelligible reason why that ritual should be that way. Thus, for Shātibī, the non-intelligibility of
reasons is a jurisprudential basis for *ta’abbud* that plays a role similar to the un-readability of God’s mind that is a philosophical basis for *ta’abbud*. Both are ways of expressing the limits of reason and the resulting fall back onto the simple text. In the language of Chapter 1, we should take the *‘ibādāt* at face value (simplicity) because there can be no sufficient reason to do otherwise (because God’s mind is unreadable or the rationale for the ritual is non-intelligible).

Thus, reasons are non-intelligible in the *‘ibādāt* and what is required is *ta’abbud*. Neither can the Shari’a be extended in the realm of *‘ibādāt* because we do not understand the reasons (*‘ilal*) for specific rituals and so there is no rational basis for creating new ones. We do have general reasons for the *‘ibādāt* as a whole, and these have to do with instilling humility and submission but these reasons are too general to give us a substantial basis for creating specific new *‘ibādāt*. Thus, Shātibī sees the *‘ibādāt* as a fixed realm within the Shari’a and if this realm is subjected to restriction or expansion this would be *bid’a* (unlawful innovation in religion). On this basis, he condemns many practices such as some forms of congregational invocation often introduced under Sufi influence.76 In contrast to this, reasons are intelligible in the *‘adāt* (habits and customs of life). For example, the reason for writing contracts is to have a record that will prevent later disagreement on the terms of the contract. When a reason (*‘ilal*) for a divine order is discernible it is possible to extend that order via analogical reasoning (*qiyyās*) to cover other cases. A video recording of parties agreeing to the terms of a contract could be seen by a jurist as an alternative way of keeping a record of the contract. In this case, he may see no need for a written contract because, while this is literally against the law, we know the *‘ilal* for the law is to have a record that prevents later disagreement. The video recording may be just as or even more effective in keeping a record. Thus, the realm of the *‘adāt* is where reasons are discernible and in this realm the Shari’a may evolve with time.

Rashid Rida is basically in agreement with this distinction between ritual and transactional law. But he exploits the distinction for his own ends. He maintains that the perfection of Islam referred to in the Quran is in the realm of ritual (*‘ibādāt*) and in this realm revelation dictates the law as there is no room for innovation and change. At the same time, in transactional law (*mu’āmalāt*), reason must hold the reins because social conditions are always changing.77 Here, the Islam of 7th century Arabia cannot be seen as perfect and must be open to *jihād*. The Prophet himself made errors of judgment in worldly affairs and so revelation cannot play the central role in facilitating adaptation to new social realities. Up to this point, it is difficult to distinguish the views of Shātibī and Rida, as they both seem to uphold the *‘ibādāt*/*mu’āmalāt* (*‘adāt*) distinction in a similar way. But an example will illustrate how far apart they really are.

To illustrate the point, let us continue with our use of the *ribā* example from the last chapter. According to Rida, the word *ribā* is *mujmal*, that is, it is of doubtful interpretation and we are at liberty to interpret it in more than one way. We have already seen that the word means increase but Rida proposes the interpretation that *ribā* is an increase without effort.78 Thus, it is not mere increase but rather increase without effort (or even better, increase without effort and/or risk) that is banned. Rida also maintains that the Quranic ban on *ribā* (interest financing) should be lifted for another reason, viz. considerations of *maslahah* (public good). For example, development and microfinance banks work hard for the good of the people. Rida specifically makes the point that if Muslims fail to engage in *ribā* practices then they will not be competitive with non-Muslims, and this will entail *mafsadā* (public harm; opposite of *maslahah*) for the Muslims.79 For this reason, the Caliph
ought to consider changing circumstances and advance the maslahā of the Muslims by allowing ribā.

Shātībī belonged to the 14th century and may have felt less pressure to accommodate ribā practices, and so he is in basic disagreement with all of this reasoning. In order to solve the jurisprudential riddle of the basis for the difference in the verdict of Shātībī and Rida concerning ribā, we should ask the following question: what has led the apparently closely related views of Shātībī and Rida to such a divergent result if they are basically in agreement on the ‘ibādāt /mu’āmalāt distinction? We begin to offer an answer by observing that for Shātībī ribā would be classified under ‘ibādāt while for Rida it is under mu’āmalāt. For Shātībī, the ribā prohibition could never be compromised because as an ‘ibadat it is a symbol of God. For Rida, it has to be revised because as a mu’āmalat it is just another worldly matter that must change with the needs of society. But what criterion exists for deciding whether it is in one category or the other?

The mistake is Rida’s. He has failed to engage the criterion offered by Shātībī for deciding whether something is an ‘ibadat or a mu’āmalat. As we saw earlier, Shātībī says that if the reasons for an injunction are non-intelligible then we are dealing with an ‘ibadat. The reasons for the ban on interest are of course non-intelligible. True, Rida may object that there are intelligible reasons for banning interest because of exploitative usurious practices in Arab society. But this does not work because exploitation is a reason (‘illā) to ban usury. Surely, some Arabs may have been giving low interest loans that were not exploitative but rather beneficial. Why ban interest as a whole, even an interest of one percent? As we saw in the last chapter (Chapter 2: Section 7 (& endnote 64)), a literal reading of the Quran bans an interest of even one percent and such a ban was actually observed by the early Muslims. The reasons for banning all and any interest are non-intelligible, in the same way as are the reasons for offering prayer five as opposed to four times a day.

We just saw that Rida does not engage Shātībī’s ibādāt /mu’āmalāt (‘adāt) distinction in a deep way. Shātībī’s position has to be that we cannot read God’s mind in order to ascertain why it is that he banned interest. Given our epistemic limits, we must accept the prohibition on interest as a symbol of God. Even so, Rida may still object that Shātībī is willing to see a reason (‘illā) for other Quranic injunctions such as the writing of contracts (the reason being record keeping). With this ‘illa in hand Shātībī is willing to engage in ijtihād and could conceivably allow a video recording to replace the written contract. How can Shātībī be so sure that he knows God’s reason is merely record keeping and a video will do the job just as well or better? After all, couldn’t the written contract be a symbol that must never be violated so that a video recording ought to be seen as sacrilegious. This may seem an interesting challenge from Rida but it is fairly obvious how Shātībī would respond to it. Shātībī would ask Rida to pay attention to the language of the Quran. The prohibition on interest is made with expressions of great anger and violent threats. Thus, even a lay reader of the Quran would know it is a symbol. The order for writing contracts, by contrast, is mentioned in a very matter of fact way and there is no divine emotion discernible.

To be sure, Shātībī probably does believe that he knows God’s reason (‘illa) for the ban on interest. God’s reason may be that the whole system of interest banking as opposed to normal business in goods and services is detrimental to a healthy economic life. Rida is in search of a reason but the one in Shātībī’s mind obviously hurts his position, as he wants to lift not impose the ban. Thus, Shātībī has no need to defend the reason that he has in mind because simply saying that we do not know
the reason is enough to defeat Rida. In any case, any reason we could accept will work against Rida and this may be Shāṭībī’s final argument, viz. any commonsensical rationale for the ban on ribā must work against Rida’s view. In other words, Shāṭībī’s final argument may be based on commonsense.

Rida insists that maslahā (human necessity and public interest) must override textual considerations.81 Because of this insistence, he runs afoul of my earlier prioritization of symbol over morality and welfare (Chapter 2: Section 2). This is the reason for labelling him a utilitarian. He feels that even the primal sources, that is, Quran and Sunna, must be subordinated to considerations of utility, that is, human necessity and public interest. This is in contrast to Shāṭībī who made use of the notion of maslahā in order to override the later accretions of the classical system (ijmā’ and qiyās) but not the primal sources. Shāṭībī does not challenge the rationale of literalism in reading the primal sources. On the contrary, he uses the power of that rationale against the later accretions. The problem with Rida’s proposal is that he does not offer a reason for subordinating Quran and Sunna. So he raves against literalism without challenging the rationale behind it. As a result, it is difficult to view his proposal as anything more than an alternative in theory, and not a very good one because of the relativism that it introduces into interpretation of the primal sources. Rida’s view is that it is the state’s evaluation of utility (necessity and interest) that must decide whether the primal sources are to be subordinated in a particular case.82 Notwithstanding all the problems of statecraft there is the problem of the conceptual priority of the state over revelation that is given no rational basis.

Ramadān Būṭī counters Rida’s proposal of subordinating the Quran and Sunna. He does so by redefining the ‘ibādāt/mu’amalāt distinction that had been exploited by Rida. Rida had used the distinction to claim that in the mu’amalāt the primal sources were open to ijtihād on the basis of maslahā. He had then packed more things into the mu’amalāt category (e.g. ribā) than conservative Muslim scholars such as Būṭī could be comfortable with. Būṭī’s reaction is to do the opposite and he makes the category of ‘ibādāt even more expansive than Shāṭībī had envisioned.83 His view is that we should be imbued with religious morality with respect to all of God’s injunctions because it is religious motivation and His injunctions that are the basis of law and life.84 Thus, all injunctions are a form of ‘ibādat. To uphold an ‘ibādāt/mu’amalāt distinction with the mu’amalāt as an expansive category is to sanction a Western separation of church and state that is simply unacceptable.85 Humanist, liberal, and utilitarian proposals that permit ribā and forbid polygamy (since they are considered to be mu’amalāt) are against Quranic decrees whose purpose and wisdom cannot be grasped by the human let alone modern intellect.86 Būṭī not only deflates the category of the mu’amalāt but also limits the ijtihād that is permissible in it by requiring that such ijtihād must occur in harmony with the traditional schools of fiqh.87 However, Būṭī’s redefinition of the ‘ibādāt/mu’amalāt distinction is not well considered. First, like Rida, he also fails to engage Shāṭībī’s reason for making the distinction in the first place. Shāṭībī had good reason for making the distinction (non-intelligibility of ‘illā) and his method is certainly not arbitrary. Būṭī would have done well to consider that. Second, Būṭī is open to a challenge from Rida. If most things are ‘ibādāt then it is not only ribā that is prohibited (because it is a symbol) but also an innovation such as a video recorded contract as opposed to a written one (because the Quranic command to write contracts should then also be seen as an inviolable symbol). Video recorded contracts, like interest banking, would be sacrilegious. Būṭī may want to respond that recording contracts is a mere transactional issue (mu’amalat) and so a video recording may not be sacrilegious, but the problem is that he is not proposing a method for placing the command to write contracts into the mu’amalāt category.88 As we cannot allow him to use Shāṭībī’s method, how will he answer the following question: Why is ribā
an 'ibādat but writing contracts a mu’amalat? As a result, his excessive divine symbolism and strict literalism could be seen to close the door to even the most reasonable ijtihād. In the end, Būtī may simply accept this as a fact about his position but for those seeking an evolution in the law (most all modern scholars) this is a very unsavoury fact.

Alternatively, Būtī could respond that ribā is different from a video recorded contract because of the language of the Quran. With ribā divine emotion (in this case anger) is discernible and this is not the case with written contracts. Thus, contracts may be video recorded in this day and age but ribā is eternally prohibited. In offering this response, Būtī would finally have proposed a method for making the ‘ibādat /mu’amalat distinction this time based on the presence of divine emotion in the language of the text. But such a response will get Būtī into an uncomfortable position when considering ‘ibādat where divine emotion is not discernible. For example, as a conservative scholar he has to see the headscarf for women as a symbol of God but nowhere in the Quran or Sunna do we see God expressing anger on that issue. So Būtī wants to see it as a symbol but has no way to classify it as such (because his language argument fails in this case). Shātībī, of course, would have no problem with this case because the ‘illā for the headscarf is non-intelligible and this is what makes it an ‘ibādat. To be sure, there is an ‘illā for modesty in general but the headscarf is too specific an injunction to discern an ‘illā for it (much like the prayer five as opposed to four times a day). Similarly, there is an ‘illā for the prohibition on usury but not for the prohibition on a reasonable amount of interest. Where an ‘illā is not discernible Shātībī has an ‘ibādat but Būtī cannot fall back on that argument because he does not accept Shātībī’s method of making the ‘ibādat/mu’amalat distinction. Of course, it is not only that Būtī does not accept Shātībī’s method but that he does not propose a method of his own. This opens him up to an effective challenge from Rida, as we saw in the case of written contracts in the last paragraph.

We have discovered that Rida, while not an S-minimalist like Soroush is not a Q-minimalist like Shātībī either because he does not see the ban on ribā as eternal, as part of the Quran’s minimal guidance (Q-minimalism) and Islam’s minimal perfection. Thus Rida is to be placed to the right of Soroush on the liberal-conservative spectrum but to the left of Shātībī. To the right of Shātībī stands the conservative Būtī who cannot be characterized merely as a Q-minimalist because his theory pushes us towards the view that even minor legal injunctions such as written contracts are eternal, and so he is closer to Soroush’s dreaded Q-maximalist (a person who feels that the Quran has given eternal laws on every detail of life and this is what is meant by the perfection of Islam). Where does Rahman stand in this liberal-conservative spectrum? Well, Soroush stands at the extreme liberal left with his view of essential Islam as minimal guidance, as faith and humanism.89 Because Rahman’s is a systematic and deeply considered rejection of literalism, he should be seen as more liberal than Rida. Thus, Rahman is to the immediate right of Soroush with his view that universal moral (and liberal) principles can override a literalist reading of Islam’s primal sources. Standing to the immediate right of Rahman, Rida’s view is that considerations of utility (human necessity and public interest) can override a literalist reading of the primal sources. But utility a la Rida is much weaker than the moral law a la Rahman. Utility, being such a general psychological fact (as in feeling happy), does not seem to have the power to resist the far more focused and deeply-rooted psychology of literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason), a psychology that suggests that there can be no genuine utility without it. The moral law, on the other hand, may be a deeply psychological phenomenon (as Kant had envisaged) and could conceivably pose a formidable
challenge to literalism. So from liberal left to conservative right it is Soroush, Rahman, Rida, Shātibi, and Būtī. In the next chapter, I will try to place my hermeneutics within this spectrum.

2 Ibid., pp. 119-21
3 Ibid., p. 121
4 Ibid., pp. 149-50
5 The central question is whether there is *personal* gain in upholding *social* justice, whether the *individual* interest is in harmony with the *collective* welfare. Democracy, as such, is not central to this debate because it is possible for a person to uphold social justice and be moral and yet fail to believe that democracy is the best decision mechanism for society.
6 Recall that Rahman’s theory required Muhammad to be in contact with the moral law which is a part of God.
7 Soroush, *Expansion*, pp. 272-3
8 Ibid., p. 273
11 Ibid., p. 273
12 Ibid., pp. 328-9
13 Ibid., p. 290
14 Ibid., p. 289
15 Ibid., p. 295
16 Ibid., pp. 272-3
17 Ibid., p. 294
18 Ibid., p. 337
19 Ibid., pp. 291-2; see also p. 329
20 Ibid., p. 338
21 Ibid., p. 332
22 Ibid., p. 293
23 Ibid
24 Ibid
25 Ibid., p. 332
26 Ibid., pp. 329 & 338
27 Ibid., p. 329
28 Ibid., p. 339
29 Ibid., p. 128
31 Soroush, *Expansion*, p. 27
32 Ibid., p. 49
33 Ibid., p. 19
34 Ibid., pp. 19-20
35 Ibid., p. 20
36 Ibid., p. 19
37 http://www.laneslexicon.co.uk/
39 Soroush, *Expansion*, p. 113; see also pp. 59-62, 94, 106-7
40 Ibid., pp. 63, 67, 75, 77-81, 88-91; see also Soroush, *Reason*, pp. 149-52
42 Soroush, *Expansion*, p. 89
43 Ibid., pp. 80, 89; I say this bearing in mind that Soroush himself may not want to legalize such things. But if collective reason (see Section 3) were to settle on legalizing drugs, homosexuality, alcohol etc. Soroush would
not oppose such legalization either. This is because the bans on drugs, alcohol etc. are not essentials of Islam. As in the following passage, Soroush will go along with any practices that ‘happen to be willed and desired by human beings’. Of course, it would be a pleasing harmony if such practices were also allowed by the Quran. But the point is that if collective reason settles upon something then the Quran cannot oppose it. Soroush, \textit{Reason}, p. 152: “Not everything is left to the contest of human opinions. People with independent will and discernment, and with complete freedom and awareness, extrapolate certain principles of ethics and pragmatics from their religion (such as renouncing alcohol and gambling in Islamic societies). Although the origin of these principles is believed to be heavenly, they happen to be willed and desired by human beings. Thus heaven and earth are reconciled and the severity of the paradox of religiosity and rationality is reduced.”

Soroush, \textit{Expansion}, pp. 89, 91

As elaborated in Chapter 2: Section 2: ‘I stand as a believer before Allah, as one of the \textit{mu`minun} “whose hearts tremble with awe whenever Allah is mentioned” (8:2). As I stand before Allah, there is an immediacy and inevitability that I feel regarding what I have to do.

At least this much is certain that on the list of priorities social morality must rank below observance of divine symbols and commandments because given my belief in the All-powerful, observance of symbols and commandments is immediate. Symbolic obedience is about me as an individual, it is my salvation, and no one else matters. Under these circumstances, society and social morality are not yet on my mind and I think only of obeying Allah. Of course, if Allah’s command is to be friendly with my neighbour, or to be tolerant of Judaism and Christianity (or intolerant of homosexuality however politically incorrect that may sound), it is through my respect for His commands that social morality first enters the picture.


I thank my father for pointing this out to me.

Before embarking on a discussion of Soroush’s vision of a democratic religious government, it will be very useful to consider his view on the finality of Prophethood. Why is the concept of the Last Prophet essential to Islam? Soroush believes that all the prophets deliver the same basic message except that they particularize that message for the time and place in which they live. But if that is so, why send the Last Prophet to 7th century Arabia because surely 14th century al-Andalus and 20th century America must also need prophets to particularize the basic message for their respective time and place?

Nonetheless, we see the chain of prophets as a single unified sequence, all conveying the same basic messages, the addressee of which (in the words of the theologians) is that shared core that exists within all human beings and is immutable over time. Of course, prophets would renew and reintroduce these messages, put them at the disposal of the people anew and – depending on the dictates of the age, their personal and collective experiences, and their own particular characteristics – make changes to the outer layers; but the core remained the same. Hence, the Seal [of Prophethood] means that the need for the reintroduction of religion has been obviated and that it is, happily, no longer necessary, not that the need for religion itself has been obviated (Soroush, \textit{Expansion}, p. 28).

While the need for reintroducing the basic message in its essentials ‘has been obviated’ there is surely still a need for prophets who put the basic message ‘at the disposal of the people anew’ in a given time and place. After all, this is precisely why the Last Prophet was sent to 7th century Arabia with the same basic message, with a minimal religion that was already perfect. He was sent with the mission of renewing the basic message, particularizing the application of minimal religion to 7th century Arabia. But according to Soroush’s thinking, 14th century al-Andalus and 20th century America are quite different from 7th century Arabia (because of fundamental advances in human knowledge) and so the rationale for sending the Last Prophet to Arabia must also apply to al-Andalus and America. Like 7th century Arabia, 14th century al-Andalus and 20th century America also needed a renewal of the message. These other times and places also had a need for prophets who would ‘reintroduce these messages… anew’ in their very different circumstances. Why then is Muhammad the Last Prophet and, even if he is, then why is that concept essential to perfect religion? The fact of the matter is that the Last Prophet really fits Soroush’s bill of an accidental of Islam. All that is essential to perfect minimal
religion is that there ought to be a renewed application of that religion from time to time. For that we could have many prophets after Muhammad, for example, one sent to al-Andalus and another to America. Soroush has told us why renewed applications of the minimal religion are important but if they are so important then why should the basic message not be renewed also for 14th century al-Andalus and 20th century America? Why is Muhammad the Last Prophet? Why was Jesus’ renewed application of the perfect religion in 1st century Palestine not the last such prophetic renewal? Why was he not the Last Prophet? Why was the Last Prophet not someone sent to 14th century al-Andalus? Why renew the message for 7th century Arabia but not for 14th century al-Andalus? And even if Jesus or an al-Andalusian were to be the Last Prophet why on Earth would the concept of the Last Prophet be an essential of perfect religion? Soroush does maintain that it is essential (Soroush, Expansion, p. 46. Note that the text says that he is the Last Prophet and the text says that Gabriel came to him and Soroush follows the text when it says he is the Last Prophet but not when it says that Gabriel came to him). But given his elusive rationale for this let us see what would happen if he finally chooses to say that the Last Prophet is not an essential concept. In that case, essential Islam could dispense with (culturally translate away) the historical accident of Muhammad as the Last Prophet (just as we can dispense with (culturally translate away) the abolishment of homosexuality). For Soroush, one could then essentially be a Muslim even if one did not believe that Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets. The view that the essential definition of Islam does not include a belief in Muhammad as the Last Prophet would officially cast Soroush out of the fold of Islam. According to the shahādā, there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet, and for the Quran he is the last one, but for Soroush he would not essentially or necessarily be the last one. Other prophets could follow and that would not go against essential Islam. This would be such a radical break from traditional Islam that it is probably the reason that Soroush chooses to delimit his reconstruction and retain the Last Prophet as essential. But on the basis of what theory have his bulldozers ground to a halt precisely before the concept of the Last Prophet, retaining it as essential while bulldozing almost everything else as accidental?

The theory that he offers is not a good one. He makes a distinction between the Prophet’s ability to have mystical experiences and his ability to legislate on the basis of them. Muhammad is the Last Prophet not because he is the last person to have sublime mystical experiences but rather because he is the last person who is able to legislate for others on the basis of those experiences. The Last Prophet is the last because he is the Last Legislator and not because he is the Last Mystic.

As it were, what a prophet says is: “I am the law, I am the proof, I am the backing for what I am saying”. And this effectively marked the beginning of prophetic legal missions, the essential core of which is legislative guardianship. This was why prophets viewed their own experiences as binding on others... And it has to be said that considering one’s personal experiences as binding on others and viewing this as an adequate basis for making decisions that affect people’s lives, property, beliefs, welfare and felicity is a heavy burden to carry and demands tremendous courage. This lies at the heart of prophethood and it is prophethood in this sense that has come to an end. No one will ever appear after the Prophet of Islam whose personality as a prophet can serve as adequate backing for their words and deeds and impose religious duties on others. But, of course, the possibility of having religious experiences and knowing hidden things has by no means come to an end and the world continues to host saints (awliya Allah/friends of God) (Soroush, Expansion, p. 39).

It is only the prophets who can carry the ‘heavy burden’ and have the ‘tremendous courage’ to give rules to others and are thereby ‘legislative guardians’. Muhammad was the last of these legislative guardians, the last mystic legislator, but certainly not the last mystic, not the last person to be in communion with God.

This points to one significant difference between prophetic experiences and mystical experiences. Religious experience can embrace a multitude of things: it can mean “ascension” for some, it can entail subtle spiritual revelations, it can involve the sight of heaven and angels, it can consist of hidden communications with God, and so on and so forth. These are all mystical experiences and they are all ‘intransitive’. But prophets’ experiences surpass all of these things. They are “transitive” experiences that create duties and dictate action (Soroush, Expansion, p. 39).

But immediately there is a problem. If the mystics after Muhammad can have the experience of ‘ascension’, ‘subtle spiritual revelations’, ‘the sight of heaven and angels’, and ‘hidden communications with God’ then why can they not also legislate? (Soroush, Expansion, pp. 40-1) Granted that they did not actually legislate but
surely that is merely an accidental of Islam. If a mystic such as Rumi was in some form of contact with God (for Soroush, Rumi is the Seal of the Mystics (Soroush, Expansion, p. 127)) then there is no essential reason that he could not also offer a renewed prophetic application of Islam for 13th century Iran. In what way is it essential for Islam that Rumi, a person who was in communication with God, never passed a law that was applicable to all the Muslims of his time and place? What difference would it make to Islam if Rumi had been a legislator? The answer has to be that this would go against the status of Muhammad as the Last Legislator. But why is this last concept essential to Islam? We need to decide what is essential: is it Muhammad as Last Legislator or is it Rumi’s ability to legislate on the basis of his sublime mysticism? If Soroush’s answer is Muhammad as Last Legislator then what is the basis for giving this answer. Is it a literal reading of the Quran which states that Muhammad is the Last Prophet? But why should the literal reading determine what is essential because, for Soroush, the literal reading never does that (for otherwise the abolishment of homosexuality would also be essential)? It seems that Soroush has no basis for declaring that essential Islam requires Muhammad to be the Last Prophet. Without such a basis, the Last Prophet is accidental to Islam and Soroush is no longer a Muslim since he has to believe that if other prophets come after Muhammad that would in no way go against (essential) Islam.

The traditional theory is much stronger. Muhammad is the Last Prophet on the basis of both his spiritual and legislative power. The angelic person of Gabriel visited Muhammad and will not visit anyone after him. Thus, Muhammad’s spiritual experience is distinctive and he is the Seal of the Prophets because of it. No one after him will have a similar spiritual experience. Muhammad has also delivered the perfect (Q-minimal) religion (that includes basic fiqh) that is in harmony with the human psyche and basic instinctive drives and he is the Seal of the Prophets for this reason as well. Muhammad as the Last Prophet is essential to Islam because of Gabriel’s final visitations to man in which he brought from heaven God’s perfect fiqh. God has willed that Gabriel will not visit any of us anymore and in any case Q-minimal religion is perfect and complete so there is no need for such a visitation.

53 Soroush, Expansion, p. 43
54 Ibid., p. 46
55 Soroush, Reason, pp. 131-2
56 Ibid., p. 127
57 Ibid., pp. 110, 116, 121
58 Ibid., p. 120
59 Ibid., pp. 108-9
60 Ibid., p. 140; see also Soroush, Expansion, p. 149
61 Soroush, Reason, pp. 132-3
62 Ibid., pp. 129, 137
63 Ibid., p. 136
64 Ibid., pp. 136-7
65 See Appendix 1 for the superiority of Islam over Christianity in this regard.
66 Ibid., pp. 123-4; see also Soroush, Expansion, pp. 151-2
68 Ibid., pp. 152-3
69 Ibid., p. 152
70 Ibid., p. 132
71 Ibid., p. 153; see also p. 147
72 Ibid., p. 141
73 Ibid., p. 142
74 Ibid., p. 147
75 Masud, Shâtibi’s Philosophy, pp. 201-2
76 Ibid., pp. 89-90
77 Hallaq, Shari’ah, p. 505
80 Rida, al-Riba, p. 56
81 Hallaq, Shari’ah, pp. 507-8
82 Ibid; Rida, al-Khilafa, Vol. 1, pp. 17, 27, 35, 109

Hallaq, *Shari’a*, pp. 512-3

Bûtî, *Dawâbit*, p. 117, as cited in Hallaq, *Shari’a*, p. 513

Christmann, “Islamic Scholar”, pp. 69-70; Hallaq, *Shari’a*, pp. 536 & 542

To my knowledge, mostly from secondary sources, Bûtî does not propose such a method. My colleague, Mohammad Arif, has read Bûtî’s main work *Dawâbit al-Maslâha fi al-Shari’a al-Islamiyya* and his reading agrees with the view in the text.

Of course the humanistic reading is widespread among reformers, e.g., Mojtabah Shabstari, *Qira’at-i Insani az Din*. I thank Rizvi for this source.
Chapter 4

A New Hermeneutics of the Quran

At the end of the last chapter we stole a glance at a liberal-conservative spectrum with Soroush and Būṭī respectively securing the liberal left and conservative right ends. Soroush insisted on a pluralist hermeneutics while Būṭī on a strictly literalist one. To the right of Soroush stands Rahman who insisted on a liberal hermeneutics and to the latter’s right is Rida who insisted on a utilitarian one. Soroush, Rahman, and Rida do not engage the rationale for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason) and offer no sufficient reason for their departures from literal meanings. This severance of a hermeneutical tie to the text threatens us with relativism. On the conservative side of the bridge, we have Shāṭībī who embraced literalism but whose strict literalism in matters of ūbadat threatens to spill over into the muamalat and actually does so in the case of the author to his right, namely, Būṭī. But the real problem for Shāṭībī’s view is that in keeping with his times he believed that we can attain certitude in our knowledge of God (thus ignoring epistemic limits in theology although, as we saw, he respects them in hermeneutics given his concept of the non-intelligibility of reasons). When he allows the text to set limits on rational endeavour he seems to subordinate reason to revelation, although this is not a problem for his hermeneutics where reason does not accept textual limits but rather defines its own limits by accepting the existence of a realm that lies beyond it, namely, a realm of non-intelligible reasons (in the ūbadat). But the subordination of reason to revelation is a critical problem for his theology, and his certitude vis a vis knowledge of God indicates that reason does not define its own limits (and the belief in God is not based on epistemic limits) leaving us quite nervous regarding his acceptance/rejection of open philosophical inquiry. So we are in search of a view that will fall to the right of Rida’s weak relativism but to the left of the cold shoulder that Shāṭībī gives to open philosophical inquiry. By the end of this chapter, our liberal-conservative spectrum should run from left to right as follows: Soroush, Rahman, Rida, present author, Shāṭībī, Būṭī.

It is a healthy exercise to read the Quran as a literalist with minimal presuppositions. We ought to trust the simple reading as long as there is no sufficient reason to read the text in some other way. In this context, it may be worthwhile to hark back to Chapter 1: Section 6 on religious psychology. We arrive at Islamic faith as a result of a rational choice in harmony with our deepest nature, a choice to trust the author and creator of Islam. But deaf-blind trust does not come easily because we are not happy with being deaf and blind. We give our trust only because it simply had to be given. No other rational path was open to us. And so, when we begin to interpret Islam in order to apply it to our lives, we begin with the words of Allah because the whole basis of this faith journey is our trust in Him. So it is His words that matter. We trust that the Quran is His word because there is no sufficient reason (historical or otherwise) to dam the river of trust (see p. 57 and Ch.1 endnote 62). So our Islam begins with the words of Allah and they always remain the central focus of our faith. Our Islam is also centred on the mission of the Prophet whom we trust because of his divine appointment and the divine supervision of him during this mission.

This is a declaration of basic approach and method. It is important to add that, because these basics are in harmony with the deep psychology of trust, simplicity, and sufficient reason, there is really no
other way for a rational believer to approach the texts of Islam. So my approach, or my hermeneutic (as they say), is actually something I share with all rational believers. While I agree that different believers are different subjects with their own subjective approach, I maintain that on basic matters the subjective approach of all rational believers is the same. In other words, while there are many believing subjects there is inter-subjectivity (agreement) in the basic approach. So the rational approach to the texts is inter-subjective. To say that the approach is inter-subjective is to stop short of saying that it is objective. Of course, it is inconceivable to have an objective approach to any text.

Inter-subjectivity is a concept that will stay with us as we read the Quran. Some modern authors have suggested that there are many readings of the Quran and thus argued for varying degrees of relativism. As we now proceed to read the Quran, we will see that on basic issues there can only be one inter-subjective non-relativistic reading. The most obvious example of this non-relativism is the claim that there is one God. That claim is obviously non-negotiable and not subject to any relativism. But other concepts in the Quran are similar to this as we will now discover.

1. A Literalist Reading

All-knowing Master and Quite the Author

In reading the Quran one is impressed by the author’s unrelenting pursuit of the aim of conveying some basic concepts with absolute clarity. The author does so at the cost of much repetitive emphasis though this is done from various perspectives. One of these concepts is that of Allah as rabb (lord, master, caregiver, provider, and sustainer). Allah is “lord of all the worlds” (rabb al-ālamīn), “the lord of the heavens and the earth and what is between them” (26:24), “the lord of the east and the west and what is between them” (26:28), “the lord of the seven heavens” (23:86), “the lord of the two easts and the two wests” (55:17), “the lord of all humankind” (4:1), “the lord of your fathers from the beginning” (26:26), and the lord of the previous prophets (7:122; 26:48). Other gods (arbāb, plural of rabb) are mentioned to make it absolutely clear that they have no authority over anything (12:39; 3:64). The concept of Allah as Lord (rabb) is reinforced with the concept of Him as mālik (king, master, owner). “High above all is Allah the King (al-malik, 20:114), “the holy king” (al-malik al-quddūs, 59:23; 62:1), “the master of authority” (mālik al-mulk, 3:26) and “the master of the day of judgment” (mālik yawm al-dīn, 1:4). So I understand that one of the messages that anyone reading the Quran is meant to take away from it is that Allah is the Lord and Master of everything.

A message similar in clarity to this is that one of Allah’s attributes is that He knows everything. He is “the knowing, the wise” (2:32), “the knowing, the acquainted” (31:34), “the knower of what is in human hearts” (31:23), the knower of the “secrets of heaven and earth” and what people reveal and what they conceal (2:33), and the “knower of the hidden” (5:119). “To Him is referred the knowledge of the Hour (of Judgment), no date-fruit comes out of its sheath, nor does a female conceive or give birth without His knowledge” (41:47), “with Him are the keys of the Unseen, the treasures that no one knows but He. He knows whatever there is on earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls without His knowledge” (6:59), He reaches out to “the utmost recesses of all things by His knowledge” (7:89), and He “has knowledge of all things” (2:82; 4:176; 6:101). So Allah is All-knowing.

As the All-knowing Master of everything, I understand that Allah is also the Master of all language including the Arabic of the Quran. So for the task of interpretation it is a basic ground reality that
Allah as author is not to be accused of any human failings such as an inability to express Himself, improper use of words and grammar, and so on. As believers our working assumption is that the All-knowing knows what he is talking about and knows how to talk about it in Arabic or any other language.

So when a believer reads the Quran they rationally believe that Allah has made no mistakes in expression, style, or content. In the Quran, Allah tells us that He is the Truth (20:114; 22:6, 62; 31:30), His Word is the Truth and finds fulfilment in truth (6:73, 115; 34:6), He speaks only truth (3:95; 4:122; 6:57; 7:44; 31:33), and His primary concern is that He guide us to the Truth (2:147, 213, 221; 3:60; 7:43, 181; 34:6; 39:33; 46:30) and we discover the Truth (2:42; 3:71; 5:51, 86; 7:43). So the Quran is a book sent in truth (2:176; 2:213; 3:3; 4:105; 5:51; 6:114) and it contains a message to humankind (3:138; 4:170, 174) explained with clarity and in detail (2:2; 4:174; 5:17, 95; 6:104-5, 114, 119, 126; 7:52, 174, 184; 12:1; 15:1; 16:103; 18:1-2; 19:97; 25:33; 26:2; 27:1; 28:2; 36:69; 39:28; 41:44; 43:2; 44:58; 54:17, 22, 32, 40) so that human beings have no excuse whatsoever not to be guided to the Truth (5:21; 6:156-7; 7:172-3). This was the reason Allah sent an Arab messenger to the Arabs (2:151; 19:97; 41:44; 44:58) with a message in easy-to-understand Arabic (12:1-2; 13:37; 16:103; 19:97; 39:28; 41:44; 42:7; 44:58; 54:17, 22, 32, 40) that was to be conveyed by the messenger in the clearest manner (5:95; 15:89; 16:64; 43:29).

From all of this I understand that Allah is the All-knowing Master of everything who speaks only the truth and does so in plain words. Let us remember that it is Allah whom we trust, and what He is telling us is that whatever He says in the Quran is true and that it is also easy to understand. His claim that the Quran is a clear exposition means that if there is anything in it that is difficult for our intellect to grasp, He will draw our attention to this difficult material and guide us as to how we should classify it and generally deal with it, as would any good author. Any good author of a popular science book, for example, would similarly tell us how to think in simple terms of the difficult scientific concepts in the book. In the same way, as an author, Allah is committed to clarity. From an aesthetic point of view, it is very pleasing indeed that my personal relationship with God is such that He addresses me directly and that I can easily grasp what He is saying. Thus, while my interpretation of the Quran is literal, from a purely aesthetic viewpoint it is superior.

Slaves to the Master

A conclusion that follows directly from the status of Allah as mālik (king, master, owner) is that we belong to Him (as does everything else). We are Allah’s property. Allah is careful to drive this point home in the Quran, and it is obvious that He does so because human beings must come to terms with and fully accept their place in the order of things. He uses derivatives of the root ‘b-d to refer to our status as His slaves, this root conveying ideas of obedience, dependence, and service. Some translators and authors prefer to render the noun ‘abd (from root ‘b-d) as servant rather than slave. This would seem inaccurate, as it does not take into account Allah’s absolute ownership of human beings. Servitude to Allah obviously means fulfilling His law but importantly it also means fulfilling duties of ritual worship also referred to by the word ‘ibādāt (sing. ‘ibāda) another derivative of the root ‘b-d. In other words, what in English would normally be referred to as acts of worship (e.g. the five daily prayers) is in Arabic referred to as acts of obedience and service (‘ibādāt from the root ‘b-d meaning obedience and service). Thus, even in worship what human beings are essentially doing is obeying and serving Allah (as slaves).
The Quran makes plain the following: we must not serve (‘abada) anything other than Allah (5:120-1; 20:14; 29:16-7; 34:40-1); the only reason for creating humankind and the jinn was for them to obey and serve Allah (li-ya’budūnī, 51:56); the prophets (4:172; 6:83-8, 38:17, 30, 41, 44-5), believers (‘ibād ul-rahmān, 25:63; 7:206), jinn, and angels (‘ibādu l-rahmānī, 43:19; 7:206) are slaves (‘abd, pl. ‘ibād, ‘ābid; also ‘ābid, pl. ‘ābidūn) of God; “not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to the Most Gracious as a slave (‘abd)” (19:93). For the Quran, the believers are the best of humanity for they rise to their true calling by saying ‘we hear and we obey’ (2:285; 4:46; 5:8; 64:16). That’s what slaves do.

In classical Arabic, the other primary meaning of ‘abd is slave to a human being and the Quran uses this other meaning to draw an analogy with and thus illuminate the meaning of ‘abd as slave to Allah (30:28). The parallel with the real life phenomenon of slavery is used to facilitate the reader’s understanding of the master-slave relation of God and human beings. The Quran’s use of ‘abd was not new and the word was commonly used in 7th century Arabia in the names of children offered as devotees to one of the idols, for example, ‘Abd Manaf, ‘Abd al-‘Uzza, ‘Abd Shams, and ‘Abd Manat.

When I read the Quran, I understand it to mean that I am locked into a master-slave relationship with Allah. The vast majority of believers get the same message. Is another interpretation possible? The language of the Quran is divine and, thus, in an obvious sense metaphorical. The master-slave relationship is a metaphor that Allah is using to illuminate the true relationship between Him and human beings. Allah is telling us that when we try to understand our relationship to Him, thinking on the master-slave metaphor will allow us to arrive at the truest understanding. In other words, as far as human concepts go, the concept of slave will best allow us to understand our place in the universe. The master-slave metaphor is the most appropriate one as it sheds the most light on our status (of course this does not mean that it is only a metaphor and not also in some sense real). It has been suggested, especially in liberal discourse, that it may be possible to interpret the master-slave relationship as a metaphor for some other kind of relationship (for example, a boss-servant or guardian-child relationship). I must confess that this possibility escapes me. My obvious objection would be to ask why Allah uses the master-slave metaphor in trying to convey the meaning of a boss-servant or guardian-child relationship. Could He not have simply employed the directly appropriate metaphor, for example, the guardian-child metaphor to convey a guardian-child relationship? Why use the master-slave metaphor to communicate a guardian-child relationship when it would be inordinately more lucid to use the guardian-child metaphor for that purpose? Allah’s commitment to clarity along with His impressive writing skills based on His absolute mastery of the Arabic language, suggest that He would have used the appropriate metaphor rather than allow for a situation where human beings are left guessing as to the true nature of their relationship with Him.

In addition to this, we should observe that the Quran makes careful use of words such as mālik (king, master, owner) and ‘abd (primarily slave, but also devotee, servant) in a way that these words give meaning to each other, and this interlocking system of meaning fixes the meaning of each word. Thus, the word mālik makes it very difficult to read the word ‘abd as servant instead of slave because mālik in Quranic usage strongly conveys the meaning of ownership (and, furthermore, this meaning is reinforced with the analogies to real life slavery). Also bear in mind that if Allah were using words such as mālik and ‘abd in some special way that the Arabs were not accustomed to, then He would have taken the time to indicate this somewhere in His Book (or through the Prophet).
As we cannot accuse Him of being a sloppy writer who simply fails to warn the reader of a special use of common words, it seems to make a whole lot of sense to simply come to terms with our status as slaves.

This reading of the Quran is absolutely sealed when we reflect on our epistemic limitations as human beings in interpreting the words of God. When interpreting a human literary work, we can reconstruct the socio-historical context in which the author lived and engage in some mind reading to understand what the author is saying. After all, we share our humanity with the author and can realistically hope to understand his thoughts and motivations. Can we do the same with Allah? Is there a socio-historical context in which He lived? Can we read His mind? These suggestions are obviously ridiculous and the Quran also rejects any possibility of this: “You know what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Yours, for You know in full all that is hidden” (5:119). This brings us once again face to face with the limitations of our knowledge, our metaphysical deafness and blindness. In other words, we’re back to the universe of deaf-blind trust. I trust either Allah’s words or the meaning given to those words by the Prophet and some of the early Muslims. If the persons in my universe of trust fail to indicate that the use of words such as mālik and ‘abd is quite unconventional and radically metaphorical (and the historical record tells us that they do indeed fail in this because they accept instead the literal use of such words) then I have no basis whatever to believe that Allah wants me to think of myself as other than His slave.

Thus, we see that all rational believers must see their relation to Allah in light of the metaphor of being a slave. There is no relativism here. Rather we have inter-subjectivity. All believing subjects ought to understand their slave status in the same way on pain of being irrational. Only irrational believers would understand their status in light of the metaphor of being a servant or child of Allah. Furthermore, the best slaves, the ones who will be rewarded, are the ones who say ‘we hear and we obey’. This is the picture that the Quran paints for us. It is a picture that becomes even clearer when we consider the nature of the orders that Allah gives His slaves.

*Symbols of Submission* 8

The key phrase that sheds light on the nature of Allah’s orders is found in a couple of verses in the Quran (3:7; 11:1) where Allah refers to the *ayāt muhkamāt*. The first word (ayāt) means signs. The second word (muhkamāt) means clear. These verses are saying that there are clear signs of Allah in the Quran. The Quran’s use of the word *āya* (sign, pl. *ayāt*) is versatile. In its original use, the word refers to the signs of Allah in nature (2:164; 77:25-7; 79:27-32) and history (51:34-46; 79:15-26) and the miracles of past prophets (2:73; 5:117; 79:20)9. However, in some places (2:151; 3:101, 108; 5:47; 31:7; 45:25; 83:13), the word seems to refer to verses of the Quran (as in 83:13, “when Our ayāt are recited to him he says: mere legends of the ancients”) while in some places (3:113, 199; 5:47) it seems to refer to the verses of earlier scriptures.10 Thus, the word *ayāt* means not only signs of Allah but also the verses of divine scripture. The link between these meanings is that the *ayāt* (verses) of the Quran are *ayāt* (signs) of Allah’s creative activity in the way that the phenomena of nature and history are also *ayāt* (signs) of this activity. Divine verses are also signs of the divine.

Thus, the word *ayāt* refers also to verses of Allah and the phrase *ayāt muhkamāt* refers to clear verses. We should pause for a moment to have a closer look at the meaning of *muhkamāt* that we are translating as clear. This word is derived from the root *h-k-m* meaning ‘to be firm and solid’ and

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‘to be secure from falling to pieces’\textsuperscript{11}. The root \textit{h-k-m} also stands for ‘deciding between two things’\textsuperscript{12} and the derivative \textit{hakim} actually means a judge or ruler (one who decides). So \textit{muhkamāt} is usually understood to mean firm, established, and decisive, and the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} are verses of firm and established meaning that in some sense decide matters. The Quran also refers to itself as the deciding Word (86:13; \textit{la qawl un fasāl}), and the meaning is that it is a word that decides between good and evil. Those who pay heed to the signs and verses of Allah are good while those who do not are evil. So the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} are the decisive verses, the verses that decide between people, the good people being those who say ‘we hear and we obey’.

In verse 3:7, the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} (firm verses) are contrasted with the \textit{ayāt mutashābihāt} (ambiguous verses). The word \textit{mutashābihāt} is derived from the root \textit{sh-b-h} which could mean either ‘to be ambiguous, dubious, unclear’ or ‘to be similar, to look alike’\textsuperscript{13}. As \textit{mutashābihāt} occurs in this verse in contrast to \textit{muhkamāt} (firm, established, decisive) it is widely understood to have the first meaning of ambiguous rather than the second meaning of similar (as similar is hardly a contrast to firm).\textsuperscript{14} This is another example of the interlocking system of meaning in the Quran where the meaning of a word may be fixed by another word that is brought into contrast with it (we saw this earlier when the meaning of \textit{mālik} as owner fixed the meaning of \textit{‘abd} as slave rather than servant). But where the word \textit{muhkamāt} fixes the meaning of the contrasting word \textit{mutashābihāt}, the word \textit{mutashābihāt} also in turn illuminates the meaning of \textit{muhkamāt}. As the \textit{ayāt mutashābihāt} are ambiguous, dubious, and unclear verses, the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} take on the meaning of being unambiguous, unequivocal, and clear verses. Thus, in addition to being firm, established, and decisive, the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} are also unequivocal and clear verses. This meaning is reinforced by the frequent reference to the verses (\textit{ayāt}) as \textit{bayyināt} (manifest, made clear, 2:99, 187, 219, 221, 242; 45:25).

Verse 3:7 also tells us that the \textit{ayāt muhkamāt} are the \textit{umm-ul kitāb} (literally, mother of the Book). Thus, the unequivocal verses (\textit{ayāt muhkamāt}) are the foundation of the Quran (\textit{umm-ul kitāb}). There is a clear sense that the community of believers must stand united on the foundation of the Quran, because in 3:7 we are also told that it is only those who are perverse and want to create schisms among the believers that seek the interpretation of the ambiguous verses. The message seems to be that the unequivocal verses have a natural and obvious meaning, and all true believers will grasp this meaning in an immediate way. Our response to these verses should simply be to say ‘we hear and we obey’. By contrast, the ambiguous verses can have more than one meaning and could be interpreted in various ways and may thereby cause schisms within the community of believers. For this reason, the unequivocal verses are widely seen to lay down the principles of Islam, the positive and prohibitory law (\textit{al-halāl wa l-harām}), the basic duties (\textit{fara‘id wa ahkām ash-shari‘a}) and punishments (\textit{hudud}), and Islamic dogma and doctrine (\textit{‘aqidah}).\textsuperscript{15}

The following translation of 11:1 reconfirms the message in 3:7: “A.L.R. This is a Book with unequivocal (\textit{uhkimāt}, same root \textit{h-k-m as muhkamāt}) verses (\textit{ayāt}) further explained in detail (\textit{thuma fussilat}) from one who is wise and well-acquainted”. I understand all of this to mean that there are unequivocal verses in the Quran that tell us what our religion is all about in lucid detail and that it is these verses that we are to pay attention to and stand united on for they are the foundation of the Book. As the orders of Allah are contained in unequivocal verses, I understand that Allah gives orders that are crystal clear.
It is a testament to the versatile use of the word *āya* (signs) that even the orders of Allah may be thought of as signs (and, of course, as clear signs). In the Quran, after giving an order Allah says that He has made His signs clear to us and thus seems to refer to the order as a sign (2:219, 221). A sign is something that gives a clue, reminds, or guides, for example in the way that a sign-post does. And a sign of Allah is one that guides us to Him, to a realization of His existence. We have considered signs of Allah in nature, history, miracles of the prophets, and divine verses. But in what sense can an order of Allah be a sign from Him? Well, it can be a sign in the sense that it guides us to a realization of His existence. When we obey Allah’s orders we experience not only the benefits of but also the feeling that comes with obeying Him. If the orders are really from Allah, then the experience of their benefits and the way it feels to obey will guide us to a realization of His existence. Thus, whereas a verse such as 2:164 calls upon us to engage only in pure reflection (on the signs of Allah in nature), verses such as 2:219 and 2:221 essentially seem to tell us to go beyond reflection to obedience and then to reflect on the way it feels to obey. Action is seen as a stimulus for reflection. For example, in 2:219 after Allah tells us to avoid unnecessary spending, He says that He has thus made His signs clear to us. But in what way is avoiding unnecessary spending a sign of Allah? Well, it is a sign of Allah because the actual experience of avoiding unnecessary spending is so beneficial and gives us such a salutary feeling that it guides us to a realization of His existence. In the same way, Zachariah was given a sign (*āyat*) by Allah not to speak to anyone for three nights (19:10). Not speaking to anyone, or fasting, or avoiding unnecessary spending can all be signs of Allah because the experiences associated with each of these may in their own way guide us to Allah.

So we see that divine orders are also signs of the divine. A somewhat different angle on this view of orders as signs is to see them rather as symbols. One example of an order is that we are only allowed to eat animals that are slaughtered in Allah’s name (2:173; 5:4-5; 6:118, 119, 121, 145; 16:115; 22:34, 36). Now it is obvious that there is no material benefit to us when we invoke Allah’s name while slaughtering an animal. It is all the more obvious that there is no material benefit to Allah when we do this (could a human being ever contribute to Allah’s material well-being?). Then why does Allah give us this apparently useless order? Well, although our obedience may be of no material consequence to Allah, it could have symbolic significance. The orders of Allah may be significant as symbols. When we invoke Allah’s name on a slaughter animal we are following an order, but we are also respecting a symbol, and respecting Allah’s symbols is a way of showing respect for Him. Of course, it is more than simply a matter of respect. In following the order we are acknowledging the existence of Allah. As He is Eternal, All-knowing, All-powerful, and so on, this acknowledgment of His existence is really submission to Him because, given His credentials, it is not possible to acknowledge Him without submitting to Him. So the orders of Allah are really symbols that He gives us, and in observing these symbols we are acknowledging His existence, and thus submitting to Him. In other words, the orders of Allah are really symbols of submission to Him. The Quran says as much in 22:37 while discussing the animal sacrifice during pilgrimage, “It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah; it is your *taqwa* (God consciousness) that reaches Him.” In the same way, when we invoke Allah’s name on a slaughter animal, we are conscious of His presence and thereby submit to Him, this being the purpose of the symbol (order).

We can see every order of Allah as a symbol of submission to Him. I mentioned that Zachariah was given a sign (*āyat*) by Allah not to speak to any person for three nights (19:10). His respect and observance of this sign was a symbol of his submission. As a principle, a human being must indicate submission only in a symbolic way. For example, prostration before Allah is purely a symbol (of
submission). Obviously, its aim is not to contribute to the material well-being of Allah. The point is that our submission to Allah must necessarily be through a symbol. Obviously, we cannot express solidarity with His cause by giving Him a helping hand as it is abundantly clear that He does not need our help (2:267; 4:131; 51: 56-7 (“I do not demand provisions from them, nor do I wish them to feed me”); 112:2). We can only express solidarity in a symbolic way. This is the obvious reason that the Quran is preoccupied with the language of signs and symbols. From the human perspective, the symbols may seem to be quite arbitrary. Nothing seems to be more pointless from a physical and economic viewpoint than to offer ritual prayer five (as opposed to four or six) times a day. As there is no other way for man to indicate submission, some symbols had to be fixed by Allah and He fixed the ones He fixed. It makes absolutely no sense for us to discuss why it is these symbols and not some others (for example, it makes no sense to waste energy on the question of why the Thamûd were given the symbol of a female camel (7:73-9; 91:11-5) as opposed to a male camel). No one can prove that five times prayers are better than four or six. We can only fall back on an accurate interpretation of the Quranic text. The symbol before Allah is five times prayer and that’s that. Again: the critical thing to understand is that man can submit only through divinely sanctioned symbol. No other path to submission is open.

All symbolic submission to Allah involves some effort (as anyone who says his prayers five times a day will attest). Some symbols require more effort than others. And some symbols directly impact our physical and economic well-being. For example, charitable work involves a material cost. This does not make charitable work any less symbolic. Keep in mind that Allah does not care a whit for the material dimension of the charity. Allah has never been in short supply of matter. What counts with Him is that we give the charity first and foremost as a symbol of submission to Him. Symbolic submission counts because we submit of our own free will, and a symbol is sufficient to indicate such submission because Allah’s focus is on the quality of the free choice not on the physical difference such a choice makes in the material universe. Charity that is not motivated by such submission simply has no value for Him. If a human action is an acknowledgement of the master-slave relationship then it counts. If not, then it does not. Again: we cannot comunicate with Allah using matter and the material universe. We must necessarily use (intention and) symbol.

The only reading of the Quran that is rational is this symbolic reading. As interpreters who are believers, we believe that the author of the Quran is Allah. This means that we must necessarily accept that we have no independent access to the life and mind of the author because reconstructing the socio-historical context of Allah’s life or reading His mind are nonsensical strategies. So we must return to the universe of deaf-blind trust, that is, we must fall back on His words in the Quran. The text tells us that the author is All-knowing and speaks the plain truth in easily intelligible language. The text uses words that have historically and contextually fixed meanings. Given lack of independent information on the author, we must go with these historical and contextual meanings, and not read the text as a metaphor for something else. The Quran could hardly be said to be a clear exposition if we go with a radically metaphorical reading because we would have no way of agreeing upon the meaning of the metaphors. Having rejected the metaphorical interpretation, we are directed by reason to a symbolic interpretation of the Quran. The Quran tells us that it contains unequivocal signs of Allah, and we saw that some of these signs are orders that are really symbols of submission. Reason (common sense) reminds us that human beings can indicate submission to Allah only through (intention and) symbol. This reminder is reinforced with the obvious message of many historical stories in the Quran (we will discuss one.
such story in the next subsection The Work of Reason) that tell us that the significance of human actions for Allah is purely symbolic. There is no material path to Allah.

The signs of Allah in the Quran are obviously to be heeded by believers. The signs are really signposts that are to be followed. They are limits not to be transgressed. In other words, they are orders to be obeyed. Such orders are really symbols of submission. Now the critical issue with Allah is the deep respect of Him that only belief in Him can generate. The problem with a stereotypical liberal is that he believes in Allah and is respectful of Him but at the same time is disrespectful of Allah’s symbols (we saw this, for example, in Chapter 2: sections 6-8 and Chapter 3: Section 4). Reason tells us to respect the symbols of Allah in order to show respect for Him, as submission to Allah can only be symbolic. Respect for symbol is the rational way to show respect for Allah. Symbols are the litmus test of rational belief. A rational believer will respect the symbols while irrational believers and disbelievers will not. Here I place the stereotypical liberal in the camp of irrational believers because they are disrespectful of symbol. On this issue, most conservatives are rational believers because they have a deep respect for symbols, thus revealing their profound insight that the only way to communicate with Allah is through (intention and) symbol.

The Work of Reason

That the significance of human actions for Allah is purely symbolic may be best illustrated by the first known interaction of Allah with a creature of free will. This is the exchange between Allah and Satan, and examining it also allows us to ascertain the work of reason in the interpretation of symbol. Allah gives Satan the order to bow down to Adam. Satan refuses to obey. Allah is furious. In the Quran, Allah explains the reason for His anger. The order to bow down to Adam, as any other order of Allah, was first and foremost a symbol of submission to His authority. The reason for His anger was the rejection of this symbol (of His authority). Allah says: “What prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee?” (7:12); “What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with My Hands?” (38:75) (italics added). That it is Allah who has created and Allah who has commanded is what is critical here. The creation of Adam and the command to bow down to him are decisions of Allah. What is important about these decisions is just that. They are decisions of Allah. Who dare not give significance to these decisions? The decisions could have been something else. Satan could have been commanded to do a hundred push-ups (just as Muslims could have been commanded to clean their houses at sunset rather than offer prayers). Whatever Allah’s decisions they must be given their proper place. A simple principle is to be followed as far as Allah’s orders are concerned. It is less important what the order is about and more important that it is an order. In other words, an order is an order. Allah was not primarily concerned that Satan rejected Adam. He was primarily concerned that Satan rejected an order (be it any order) from Him.

This is easy enough to understand. I am busy at some important work and I tell my daughter to get me a glass of water. She is watching television and says she is busy or not in the mood to get up and go to the kitchen. When she responds with such apathy, my concern will not be for the water. I can get up and get that myself now. My primary concern will be that she responded with apathy. She failed to give me my place as her father. My primary worry will be whether she is able to take her place in the order of things, whether she is able to develop a healthy respect for authority. Just as I was not concerned for the water, Allah was not concerned with what He ordered Satan to do (bow
down to Adam). Rather, He was primarily concerned that an order from Him was disobeyed. He was concerned about Satan’s inability to take his place in the order of things by acknowledging His place.

Here we must go deeper. In the Quran, Allah tells us that Satan’s real crime was not merely a rejection of His authority. It was a rejection of faith. Quran 38:73-4: “he [Satan] was haughty, and became of those who reject faith”. This rejection of faith is a rejection of belief in Allah. We may protest that Satan was having an argument with Allah (we need not be concerned with the medium through which they communicated with each other) and so how could he not believe in Allah. The answer is that as far as Satan was concerned, he was having an argument merely with his creator, and he did not believe that his creator was Allah, the All-knowing and All-powerful being. Had he believed that his creator was Allah, he would have immediately obeyed because it obviously makes no sense whatever to disobey a being that is All-knowing and All-powerful. But Satan did not believe that his creator was All-knowing and All-powerful, and in fact believed that he had some knowledge and power independent of his creator which is obviously why he thought that his opinion (on Adam) mattered. (Satan’s view of his creator was probably similar to our view of our parents. They brought us into the world but there comes a time when we think that we’re more in touch with reality than they are.) So Satan did not believe in Allah. Now in the Quran, Allah never fails to insist that it is rational to believe in Him and that rational people arrive at the truth of His existence. This Satan was not able to do. **Thus, at the deepest level, Satan’s crime was irrationality.** Irrational people fail to arrive at the existence of this All-knowing and All-powerful being and this is why they end up either as atheists or as those who say that God shares knowledge and power with other beings (that is, He has partners).

All this raises a critical issue concerning the work of reason. The work of reason is to investigate and explore the existence of Allah. Reason must primarily focus on the problem of existence. If reason gives the verdict that it is rational to believe in **(the existence of)** this All-knowing and All-powerful being, then there is no further task for reason in interpreting the symbols of Allah. After all, the symbols issue from an All-knowing being and are further declared to be unequivocal. If Allah commands five times prayer, then so be it. If He commands us not to eat pork, then so be it. Ours is not to question why. The work of reason is not to engage in discussion over divinely sanctioned symbol. The work of reason is to understand whether or not it is rational to believe in the symbol giver in the first place. Reason already has more than enough on its plate with that immense task. Satan should have focused all his rational energies on deciding whether or not to believe in Allah rather than getting into a discussion on the nature of the symbol (in this case, prostration before Adam). Liberals often get into long discussions about what the symbols demand of us. They often spend great energy in getting the symbols to be compatible with Western culture and lifestyles rather than taking on the real challenge of exploring the truth of God’s existence whatever the (symbolic) consequences. In 6: 119, the Quran says that ‘many do mislead (people) with their appetites unchecked by knowledge.’ The message is that true understanding checks the appetite, that is, it motivates a respect for Allah’s symbols (limits, orders) because one has grasped His reality. As the symbols (signs, verses, orders) are unequivocal, liberal equivocation is a symptom of a lack of understanding (of ‘appetites unchecked by knowledge’).

In saying that the real task of reason is to decide on the existence of the symbol giver, I am not saying that reason cannot help us appreciate the usefulness of the symbols for human individual and social life (e.g. the ban on intoxicants is seen to be an individually and socially useful symbol). I am
only saying that such appreciation of the usefulness of symbol to human life is not the primary task of reason. The primary task is to decide whether the symbol should be respected in the first place (regardless of its usefulness), that is, whether the symbol giver is worthy of our (deepest) respect.

By this point, we have come to accept some rational hermeneutic principles, hermeneutic because they form the basis for approaching and interpreting the texts of Islam, and rational because of the way we arrived at them. We are interpreters who are believers and so we believe that the author of the Quran is Allah. We thus accept that we have no independent access to the life and mind of the author and must return to the universe of deaf-blind trust. So we fall back on the words of Allah in the Quran, and on the interpretation of those words by the Prophet and some of the early Muslims. The text itself is absolutely clear with regard to its own truthfulness, clarity, and intelligibility. It paints the following picture for us. Allah is the Master, we are slaves. Allah gives us unequivocal orders and the best of us respond saying ‘we hear and we obey’. Human actions have only symbolic value for Allah, and so the orders of Allah are symbols of submission to Him. In this way, every order assumes a profound significance. The work of reason is not to pick apart God’s orders but to decide whether we ought to believe in Him. Basically, if it is rationally decided that He exists, then obedience must follow rationally and immediately in a literalist manner. The problem is that this picture of strict literalist obedience seems to leave no room for open philosophical inquiry.

My advocacy of a form of literalism does not deny that literalism is plagued with problems not the least of which is the bad name that it has because of its long standing historical ties to traditionalism. As a strategy, tradition-bound literalism has been unsuccessful in negotiating the social transformations wrought by modernity. The traditionalist-literalist reading has tended to confine the text, to tie the text down so that it is divested of the resources and capacity to adapt in the face of new challenges. As a result, the fiqh rulings that are based on traditionalist-literalist interpretations have generally been unresponsive to changes in the socio-political and scientific-technological environment. But as indicated at the end of the last paragraph, the deeper problem is that a tradition-bound literalism has closed the doors to rational philosophical inquiry. The work of the next section is to show that the Quranic literalism that I am advancing does not entail such an abysmal fate and, on the contrary, it is in deep harmony both with responsiveness in fiqh and rational philosophical inquiry. This is a compelling argument in favour of it. So I spend much of the next section severing the historical connection between literalism and traditionalism in order to free literalism from its ignominious past and open the way for a new bond with rational inquiry (the antithesis of traditionalism). I offer this literalism-rational inquiry synthesis as a new hermeneutics of the Quran. In what follows, my intention is not to limit the discussion to points of law although the legal context will often be useful in highlighting the point that I am making.

2. Literalism and the Scope for Ijtihād

Following other authors, I make a familiar distinction between Shari’a and fiqh. Shari’a literally means ‘path to the source’ and indicates the path a believer must follow in order to reach God. This is the sense of the word as found in the Quran (5:48; 45:18) where it means a ‘revealed way of life’ or ‘path or road (to the divine)’. But, given epistemic limits, this way of life or path is known in an absolute way to God alone. Fiqh is a human understanding of what this path might be. Thus, Shari’a is the system of rules found in revelation while fiqh is a (limited) human understanding of those
rules. Al-Shari’ or ‘the Legislator’ is a name of God, while people engaged in perception (tasawwur), cognition (idrak), and understanding (fahm) of the law are called faqih (those who strive for understanding). Obviously, as nothing is hidden from God, He is not a faqih or person who strives for understanding.¹⁷

One of the most intuitively appealing concepts in the history of Islamic law that began to find its way into fiqh literature in the 3rd Islamic century was that of maqāsid (purposes, aims).¹⁸ The notion of purposes of the Shari’a (maqāsid al-Shari’a) was really only a formal articulation of a principle already practiced by the early Muslims.¹⁹ There is the famous example of the second Caliph, ‘Umar (d. 644 A.D), who did not allow a division of the territories of Iraq and Egypt among his conquering army because this would violate the aim of socioeconomic justice, a self-evident purpose of the Shari’a. Maqāsid al-Shari’a is a concept that plays a crucial role in the journey from Shari’a to fiqh. Only if a jurist has a sense of the purpose of the Shari’a will he be able to arrive at a particular fiqh ruling because any such ruling will obviously have to be in harmony with the overall purpose.

In a deeper sense, the concept is intuitively appealing because it is grounded in the idea of God as a person who possesses will and intention. God wills the Shari’a on the basis of an intention to fulfil a purpose just as a legislator frames law with an intention to fulfil some purpose. That God has a purpose in creating the universe and human beings is a recurrent theme in the Qur’an.²⁰ Neither the system of the universe nor the system of rules governing human life can be without purpose.

Understanding the Legislator’s intent and purpose is essential to the work of a jurist who has to do his best to arrive at the fiqh ruling that is closest to the rule in God’s mind. Obviously, knowing His overall intent and purpose will set the basic context that allows one to understand the aim of a given command and thus determine a specific rule. So overall purpose gives a standpoint or perspective from where it is possible to discover right practice. Without such a standpoint the jurist’s task seems insurmountable because of the difficulty of ascertaining the basic approach or view that ought to be taken concerning any given issue.

As the word of God and the founding source of Shari’a, the natural place to seek to discover God’s purpose would be the Quran.²¹ Our literalist reading of the Quran from the previous section has already given us a clear sense of what we must take God’s purpose to be. The most important concept in the Quran is that of truth. For the author (i.e. God) truth is more important than anything else. Verses in the Quran literally say that God’s purpose in creating the universe (including humanity) is to hurl truth against falsehood so that falsehood perishes. It follows that God’s purpose in creating the universe and giving us the Shari’a is the preservation and vindication of truth. If that is indeed God’s purpose, this would reconcile a literalist reading of Islamic text with the pursuit of open philosophical inquiry. The literalist reading gives us truth as the highest value while open philosophical inquiry is aimed at the pursuit of precisely that value. Thus, in principle, literalist Islam should cherish free inquiry more than any other interpretive strategy or for that matter any other religion or culture in the world. It would seem that we have arrived here at the resolution of some problem. However, to get a sense of what problem has been resolved we need to undertake a short historical survey of the concept of maqāsid al-Shari’a.²²
As detailed in Appendix 2, the hadith movement gathered considerable momentum in the latter half of the 8th century as a result of a general deterioration in the intellectual climate of Islam. Muslims had gradually lost the confidence and ability to think independently and ask basic questions. They had begun to rely in an uncritical way on textual evidence and early legal precedents regardless of the fact that social conditions were changing. The Sunni schools of fiqh were deeply influenced by the hadith movement and came to accept text and precedent as the basic sources of fiqh. The four sources of fiqh were the Quran, Sunna, ījmā (early consensus), and qiyās (early precedents of analogical reasoning). While each of the schools had methods of ījtihād these were practiced invariably within the limits of the four sources. For example, the Hanafis accepted īstīhsān (juridical preference), the Malikis and Hanbalis īstislāh (public interest), and the Shafiis munāsabāt (suitability). But these methods were deemed legitimate only when they gave results compatible with text and precedent, that is, with the four sources of fiqh.

While the Quran and Sunna were the primal sources, the later accretions of ījmā and qiyās were also seen as binding. Following a madhab (school of fiqh) meant that one was bound not only by the primal sources but also by the ījmā accepted by that madhab and the qiyās of its early jurists. It basically meant that as a jurist one did not have direct access to the primal sources. One could practice ījtihād only within the early legal precedents (ījmā and qiyās) of one’s madhab. While this led to juridical continuity it also restricted the ability of the schools (madhāhib) to adapt to changing conditions.

The first reformer who challenged this classical system in a comprehensive legal theoretic way was Shāṭībī. Al-Andalus in the 14th century was a time and place subject to considerable forces of social and economic change. The milieu was such that it is not surprising that a jurist of this period would feel constrained by the system of law inherited from the classical period (3rd/9th century onwards). Given changing socioeconomic conditions, it is natural that some new cases would not find satisfactory resolution within the narrow limits of the four sources of law. Shāṭībī had to find a legitimate way to break through classical barriers, in order to gain some freedom in making legal decisions. So he did what any reformer would do. He went back to first principles. He used the first sources - Quran and Sunna - against the later accretions (ījmā and qiyās) of the classical system.

Shāṭībī saw that because conditions were changing some earlier precedents (of ījmā and qiyās), thought wise and beneficial in their own time, were counter-productive or suboptimal in current circumstances and were even against the purpose and spirit of the Quran and Sunna. He drew the obvious conclusion that implementation of such early precedents is against Shari’a because it is against Islam’s primal sources. So Shāṭībī invoked the primal power of Quran and Sunna to break through the legal mould cast by generations of Muslims long before his time thus creating the legislative freedom he needed. Given the elegance and effectiveness of this strategy, it is not surprising that when the Muslim world was again faced with socioeconomic and political upheaval in the 19th and 20th century, many Muslim reformers turned to Shāṭībī for inspiration.

Shāṭībī’s basic idea was that the purpose and spirit of the Quran and Sunna must override burdensome classical precedents. Thus, he sought an answer to the following basic questions: What is God’s purpose in giving us rules? What is the purpose of that whole set of rules (moral, legal, ritual) that guide practice? If we know why He gives us rules, that is, if we know what the rules are
basically for, we will be able to better understand why He gives us a certain specific rule. Understanding the point of having rules will allow us to understand the rules better. Understanding the rules better will allow us to apply them better and avoid incorrect interpretation and implementation. So Shātibī quite rightly thought that we need to understand the maqāsid al-Shari‘a (purposes of the Sharī‘a). We need to understand the intent of the Lawgiver in giving us rules. The question is how can we know of the Lawgiver’s intent?

In attempting to answer this question, Shātibī made a significant departure from the general trend in the theory of jurisprudence (usūl al-fiqh). Usūl al-fiqh had been considerably influenced by Aristotle’s views on deduction and induction. Following Aristotle, deduction was seen as the only way to attain certain knowledge while induction only gave probable knowledge. This was an age when certainty was an attainable desideratum both in theology and usūl al-fiqh. God’s existence, the Quran’s authorship, and Muhammad’s prophet-hood were all known by the believer with certainty through deductive reasoning (theological arguments were often seen as deductive proofs). In usūl al-fiqh, deductive reasoning applied to individual texts was given priority over inductive surveys of the textual evidence as a whole.

Shātibī agreed to the certainty of theological knowledge. Chances are that he thought that such certainty was to be attained via deductive reasoning. Given the modern rejection of deductive reasoning in theological matters (see Chapter 1: sections 1-4) on this view Shātibī would seem to be a product of his time. But as far as usūl al-fiqh was concerned, Shātibī broke away from the established trend. He believed that induction must have priority over deduction in determining the purposes of fiqh. The purposes of fiqh could only be determined by understanding the meaning of the Quran (and all other evidences) seen as a whole so that we do not miss the forest for the trees. In other words, an inductive survey that would allow us to see the pattern in the whole must have precedence over analogical reasoning (qiyās) that restricts itself to drawing analogies from specific instances in the text while remaining alienated from the overall scheme of things. Moreover, Shātibī believed that even though this method was inductive it would yield certain knowledge of the maqāsid. This is so because the maqāsid are so basic to Islam that there is overwhelming evidence in support of them. Thus, certainty was to be attained through inductive corroborations, an accumulation of a preponderance of evidence from many sources.

Against the zāhirīs who discouraged non-literal interpretation of text (see Ch. 1: Section 8) and the ashab al-hadīth (people of hadīth) who discouraged non-hadīth based interpretations, Shātibī stood for a holistic and balanced view of the sources of Sharī‘a. This was a view that acknowledged textual evidence without ruling out the possibility that overall context could yield a non-literal meaning, and also acknowledged the hadīth material without ruling out the possibility that other sources and considerations may oppose the hadīth-based interpretation. His interpretive strategy has essentially two steps. First, Shātibī sought to use inductive reasoning to grasp the intent of the Lawgiver. Second, rather than give literal or hadīth-based meanings to specific texts, he sought to give them meanings that would be consistent with the Lawgiver’s intent. What results did this method yield?

Shātibī outlines two historical trends that developed in answer to the question on the intent of the Lawgiver. The ashāb al-ra‘y (rationalists) believed that the intent of the Lawgiver was welfare of the believers and that human reason was capable of discovering the human good and thus
extending the application of the Shari’a to new cases in accordance with Divine intent. Against this, the zāhīris believed that the Lawgiver’s purpose was to test human beings in this world. That purpose may best be fulfilled by an authoritative revealed law that had less need of evolving, humanity’s test simply being whether or not to obey. Believers’ welfare may be an additional Divine intent but it could only be secondary and is a result of God’s grace rather than a consideration of the law’s primary purpose. It is not difficult to guess the trend Shātibi would favour as an Andalusian jurist seeking freedom in legal decision-making. In fact, Shātibi lands himself squarely with the asḥāb al-ra’y, claiming that the intent of the Lawgiver is the welfare of believers (masā’ilī ‘ibād).33 He follows this principle with earnestness in jurisprudence, elaborating that fiqh obligations are those whose consequences result in the good (maslaha) of the many (believers) over the few.34 The calculus of good and harm (mafsada; opposite of maslaha) spans both this world and the hereafter. An act that accords with maslaha, that is, with the intent of the Lawgiver, is lawful. In keeping with Divine intent, a lawful act is one that advances the good of the many in this world and the next.

As I am a literalist, you may discern that I will have some sympathy with the zāhīri view. Indeed, I do not believe that the view has nothing at all to commend it, as Shātibi’s wholesale rejection of it seems to suggest. In fact, Shātibi’s view is more problematic than the zāhīri view. There are two problems with Shātibi’s view that masā’ilī ‘ibād (welfare of believers) is God’s primary intent. The first is that God’s intent must be general and directed at all people while masā’ilī ‘ibād is too specific being directed only at believers. After all, this is God’s intent and so it must be directed at all, not simply at a subset, of humanity. The second problem is that this is God’s primary intent and thus should not be open to the further question of why God has this intention. But if, as Shātibi holds, it is the welfare of believers that God primarily intends then this is clearly open to further question because we can easily ask why - what is so special about believers? The point is that as long as the question can be posed (regardless of how readily an answer may be found) there is some mistake in saying that this is God’s most basic (primary) intention. The primary intention must be stated in a way so as not to allow further questions. God’s primary intention cannot be second guessed by a human question. The zāhīri view that God’s primary intention is to test humanity does not suffer from the first problem of being too specific because it is an intention directed at all people. But it does suffer from the second problem of being open to question because we can easily ask why God would want to test humanity. Let me attempt to resolve these problems in the hope that we may arrive at a genuine solution.

I will first try to repair Shātibi’s view. To make God’s intention general we could say that He intends not the welfare of believers but rather the welfare of humanity as a whole. But there is immediately a new problem. God will send human beings to Hell and this is irreconcilable with the idea that the welfare of humanity is His primary intent. If human welfare was His primary intent then He would not fail to achieve it (being All-Powerful) and no one would go to Hell. How could this subordinate intention (to send people to Hell) that blatantly contradicts the primary intention (of human welfare) override the primary intention? That people go to Hell indicates a profound and inexplicable failure of Allah in achieving His primary intent. Failure of a secondary intent would be understandable because it is overridden by the primary intent but failure of the primary intent is not reconcilable with an All-Powerful being. All of this means that we cannot rightly derive that the Lawgiver’s primary intent is human welfare from the same Quran that tells us that He intends to send people to Hell. Human welfare could be a Divine intent but it is not the primary one.
That attempt failed. This time I will try to repair Shâtbî’s view by making it more basic rather than more general. That God intends the welfare of believers prompts the question ‘why?’ What is so great about believers? Is it that they obey Him? There is an unsatisfactory arbitrariness to any notion of obedience. What is so great about the people who obey Him? Why shouldn’t we see them as a bunch of sycophantic loyalists? This criticism leads to a better answer. God intends welfare for those who uphold the truth of His existence and are for this reason motivated to obey Him. This is clearly better. It seems that the basic condition is upholding truth. You can be a member of the subset of humanity for whom God intends welfare simply by upholding the truth of His existence and, arguably, even more simply by simply upholding truth (remember that He is the Truth and so in upholding truth you are automatically on His side). The intent of the Lawgiver could be welfare for a human being only conditional on his upholding truth. The logical form is ‘If truth then welfare’. Thus, the primary intent of the Lawgiver is truth not welfare.

It seems that we have arrived at a solution. If God intends to uphold truth then that is an intention that is both general and basic. It applies to all of humanity and is not open to the further query as to why He chooses to uphold truth (as no independent reasons could be offered to answer such a question). Does our solution help to make sense of the problem with the zâhirî view? For the zâhirîs, God intends to test humanity. The problem is that we can ask why. According to our solution, the answer would be that God tests humanity as a way of upholding (demonstrating?) the truth. We know that in order to pass the test human beings must uphold the truth (of His existence). So God tests humanity in order to uphold truth. Our answer makes perfect sense of the zâhirî view. Those who pass the test have fulfilled God’s primary purpose (i.e. truth) and their welfare is a further intention (and promise) of God.

In any case, as literalists in textual interpretation the zâhirîs must reconcile their view that God’s primary intent is testing humanity with Quranic verses that literally tell us that the real purpose of creating the universe (including humanity) is to hurl truth against falsehood so that falsehood perishes (e.g. 21: 16-8). These verses literally suggest that humanity (and the universe) is a means to a greater purpose (this is not to deny the possibility that many human beings will transcend to becoming more than mere means). We should ask, ‘What is this greater purpose?’ For a zâhirî literalist the answer ought to have been quite plain. The purpose is the triumph of Truth, this being literally what the verses say. The intent of the Lawgiver and the maqâsid al-Shari’ā is the preservation and triumph of Truth.

It will be clear to the attentive reader that this is an answer that I like very much. I said in Chapter 2: Section 2 that al-Haqq (the Truth, the Reality) is far and away Allah’s most important name because if He is not true and real then all of His other attributes (Eternal, All-Powerful, All-Knowing etc.) are just another tall story. Moreover, the Quran appeals to us by way of truth. We are to believe in Allah because this is a true belief. In this way, the concept of Allah depends on the concept of truth. It is the concept of truth that is supreme and Allah is supreme only because we finally come to see that He is the Truth. Given this conceptual priority of truth in the Quran it makes good sense to say that, according to it, the purpose and intent of the Lawgiver is the preservation and triumph of Truth. The reason for giving us all those Shari’ā rules is to enable us to uphold truth. This is a view that offers far more potential for evolution in the Shari’ā when compared with zâhirî literalism.35 It is an insight that creates clarity in our view both of the principles of jurisprudence and the practice of fiqh.
Truth, Reason, and Religion

In following the truth paradigm, we come to see that the Shari’a must aim at establishing both the individual way of life and the social conditions most conducive to the pursuit of truth. As I said in Chapter 2: section 2, truth and reason give us the basic framework through which Allah is discovered. Shari’a literally means ‘path to the source’ and the source (Allah) can only be discovered through a rational pursuit of truth that is in turn most possible for an individual with an ethic of reasoning living in a society that nurtures that ethic. The rational pursuit of truth is advanced by a couple of common sense ingredients. First, the individual’s desires must be within rational control. This was discussed in the context of the internal tyranny of desire at the end of Chapter 3: Section 3 where Soroush did not give it the serious attention it deserves. Second, the individual should have the opportunity to think freely in order to arrive at truth. This was discussed in the context of the external tyranny of compulsion, a problem that was of the highest priority for Soroush. Let us consider these in turn.

The Shari’a aims in a deep way to bring desires within rational control. Hallaq writes: “Bringing individuals in line with the commands of the law as prescribed by God, and curbing their personal desires and whims, are precisely the reasons for which the Shari’a was decreed”.36 I see in this statement the implication that curbing ‘desires and whims’ plays a crucial role in preserving truth, as it protects our rational faculty, allowing us to recognize and obey God’s commands and is thus ‘precisely the reason[s] for which the Shari’a was decreed’. For this reason, Shari’a not only represents a positive law that monitors believers’ actions (punishing illegal ones), it also represents a moral law that is concerned with what believers say and feel.37 While the omission of obligatory (fard) and commission of forbidden (haram) acts is attached to worldly punishment, other actions are classified as recommended, neutral, and detested and not subject to worldly recompense. The latter actions have their recompense in the hereafter, and the believer is motivated to perform or avoid them for spiritual reasons. The Shari’a demands a human subject that has internalized a code of moral behaviour, a way of thinking and feeling, one who is not motivated merely by worldly recompense. This explains the amazing but authentic reports of believers confessing crimes as serious as adultery (punishable by death) to courts of law in order to avoid accountability in the hereafter. It explains the success of the Muslim court system for centuries, as the courts functioned on the basis of reliable witness testimony that was abundant because of religio-cultural upbringing and the values (and pressures) of society. In the Shari’a system, even a single oath could acquit the defendant. Moral personality and reliable testimony were the pivots of the whole system. The modern separation of morality and law was thus alien to the Shari’a that required the establishment of virtue in individual and society in order to function effectively.38

Let’s turn to freedom of thought. In order to have the opportunity to think freely the individual must have certain freedoms. He must have the freedom to think, learn, discuss, believe, and, of course, move and trade in order to survive. This begins to sound familiar, and of course it is because we’re talking about religious, political, and economic freedoms that, in the most recent historical instance, were (and continue to be) the subject of deep discussion in Western civilization. That the maqāsid al-Shari’ā should lead us into the same discussion was not pre-planned but does point to the universality of some Western values. On the flip side, the discovery of these Shari’a values in Western culture reflects in turn on the universality of the Shari’a. That Islamic law should aim at
truth (as opposed to welfare) in the way that the post-Enlightenment system of justice in the West does is further corroboration of the universality of Shari’a (as, on the flip side, it is corroboration of the universality of the basic aim of Western jurisprudence). The universality of the value of freedom for the sake of truth has the quality of being self-evident. A human being must have the opportunity to think in order to arrive at a right decision. The Quran is saying that belief in Allah is the right choice and its purpose in giving us rules must be to facilitate that choice. So the purpose of the rules (maqāsid al-Shari’a) must be to give every individual an opportunity to think. Historically, Islamic scholars cited Greek metaphysical theories that went against basic Muslim beliefs as reason for banning philosophical inquiry. Our primary maqsid of pursuing truth has the immeasurable advantage of forcing Muslims not to turn their back on the discipline of philosophy as a whole but rather to nurture the ability to make the difference between good and bad philosophy.

While the Shari’a protects the freedoms of thought, conscience, movement, speech, association, and trade because these freedoms advance the pursuit of truth, it is indisputable that all of these freedoms are to be observed within limits (indisputable because of the obvious reason that freedom must be balanced with responsibility in order to protect freedom). The limits are arrived at through the rational pursuit of truth that discovers religion. Truth and reason lay the framework for the discovery of religion that in turn sets limits on the various freedoms. For example, freedom of speech does not mean that you can say anything at all. Islam sets limits of propriety in public discourse. Nor is it permissible to trade in any good or service. Once again, the Shari’a sets limits. This point is both obvious and important but it is critical to keep in mind that the Shari’a cannot set limits on the pursuit of truth. The Shari’a draws its own authority from its discovery by truth and reason. Thus, Shari’a depends on the power of truth and reason and is not in a position to set limits on this power because it is the very basis of its own authority. Truth and reason must continually affirm the authority of the Shari’a and such affirmation requires that they operate with complete freedom. True that many in society will be immersed in the mundane and their freedom of thought will be unconsciously limited by Islam. However, there must always be some places, possibly philosophy departments in universities, where there is open discussion of the truth and rationality of Islamic belief.

Another related and critical point follows. Shari’a cannot define the limits of reason. Shari’a, as has already been said, derives its own authority from its discovery by reason. Because Shari’a depends on reason in this way it is not in a position to limit reason. Reason must define its own limits. Reason defining its own limits provokes a note on the balance between reason and revelation. This is not a balance in which human beings choose the right amount of reason and the right amount of revelation like the ingredients of a cake in order to guide their thought and conduct. The metaphor of balance fails to indicate the painful process through which such a balance may be attained. By nature (as opposed to tradition), a human being will use reason to the fullest with no regard whatsoever for revelation. Revelation only enters at a conceptually later stage because first, reason discovers it, and second, reason begins to see its own limits. In defining its own limits, reason accepts a role for revelation. For reason, the process of coming to terms with a role for revelation is a lifelong one. And it is a bitter process. Reason continually over exerts and over reaches in understanding the world only to be episodically exhausted and having to come to terms, with every failed attempt, with a role for revelation. The metaphor ‘where reason ends revelation begins’ or perhaps more accurately ‘where reason fails revelation picks up the pieces’ is more apt during this process than the metaphor of a harmonious balance of reason and revelation. Most of the time
there is no balance, only reason is completely spent. I am not trying to attain a balance rather I am simply trying to use all my powers of reason to understand my world. But it feels like I’m in a wilderness or out at sea. I tried once again to understand my world but failed. So once again I’m on a time out and I believe in God.

Reason lies in seeing the limits of reason and, as a result, a role for revelation. After its discovery of revelation, reason tries to work and interpret – and rework and reinterpret - the revealed texts in whatever way it can so that the application of the texts in the world suits reason. Reason would like to work wonders with the texts but there are limits to what it can do. We saw some of these limits in the previous section, where reason would have liked to give new meanings to words such as ‘abd (slave) and ayāt muhkamāt (clear orders) but fails because there is no rational basis for the new meanings. Reason acknowledges that it has no independent access to the life and mind of God in order to discern new meanings. Thus, reason acknowledges and sets its own limits. Islam has no business limiting the operation of reason and the Quran acknowledges this in its order of conceptual priorities where reason is prior to religion (Chapter 2: Section 2). Other terms in the Quran are similarly rationally immune from rational reinterpretation. This is true of words such as iṭa’āt (obedience) and qawwām (responsibility) that are used in the respective contexts of obedience to the Prophet and men’s responsibility for women.

Our declaration that preservation of truth is God’s primary intent gives us an umbrella concept for various modern proposals for the maqāsid found in the Quran. Such proposals aim to bring the Shari’a up to date with modern purposes and values. For example, one of the maqāsid al-Shari’a from the classical period was protection of the mind (from intoxicants, via education etc.). In modern times, the mind maqāsid has been recast as advancement of scientific thought, travelling for education, valuing individual thought rather than herd mentality, and so on. Another example of a maqāsid from the classical period is protection of honour. In modern times, this has been recast as protection of human dignity and human rights. Similarly protection of offspring is recast as care for family while freedom of belief (‘no compulsion in religion’ Quran 2:256) as religious pluralism. The primary intent of truth preservation can serve as an umbrella for all of these lesser maqāsid. Moreover, it can offer guidance as to which of these maqāsid proposals is in harmony with the overall message of the Quran. For example, it may be that religious tolerance advances the basic aim of truth preservation but that religious pluralism does not. Although some authors have advanced freedom and equality as maqāsid al-Shari’a, we saw earlier in Chapter 2: Section 6 that in the truth paradigm neither universal freedom nor egalitarianism is an obvious aim of the Quran.

Truth Paradigm at Work: Some Cases
Burdened with a philosophically incorrect view (see above, subsection A Short History of Maqāsid), we find Shāṭībī struggling to arrive at satisfactory legal rulings in important cases. One such is the case of confession of belief under duress. Shāṭībī agrees with a unanimous ruling that a Muslim under duress may lawfully utter phrases of unbelief. This is in harmony with his maslahāh view of the Lawgiver’s intent because the preservation of a believer’s health and life is obviously an important part of his welfare. Shāṭībī does not make a similar allowance in the opposite case of a non-Muslim who confesses Islam to save his life. For Shāṭībī, such confession is unlawful. To justify this discrimination it is not enough for Shāṭībī to say that the purpose of the law is the welfare of
believers and that the non-Muslim is a non-believer. There would be two problems with such justification. First, it is not clear whether all non-Muslims are non-believers. Second, this and other rulings must reinforce the validity of Shātibī’s view that God’s primary intent is believers’ welfare. In order to do so, this ruling must have some (possibly intuitive) basis independent of that view.

Shātibī obviously sees an asymmetry in the two situations (of confession under duress) and an analysis as to the reason for this asymmetry seems worthwhile. He thinks it is unlawful for the non-Muslim to confess Islamic belief because by doing so he is seeking harm (mafsadā) in the hereafter. An unbeliever confessing Islam is being hypocritical with regard to the one true religion. His hypocrisy is brazen and profound because he pretends to believe the truth and thus has the audacity to be hypocritical to truth. In contrast to this, a believer uttering unbelief is not being hypocritical with regard to the one true religion. His hypocrisy is less profound because he does believe the truth but pretends to believe some falsehood. He is being hypocritical to falsehood and is thus lying about something that is already a lie. The latter hypocrisy is acceptable under duress but not the former. So Shātibī probably sees the non-Muslim as hypocritical with regard to true belief and the Lawgiver is harsh with such hypocrites. Better to lose a life of unbelief than follow the path of the hypocritical Medinese Muslims of the Prophet’s time who are dealt with severely in the Quran. Apparently, the harm for the non-Muslim (in the hereafter) is greater than the good (of saving his worldly life of unbelief) and so his confession of Islam is unlawful.

Intuitively, however, Shātibī seems to fail to consider that both the Muslim and the non-Muslim are simply saving their life and hypocrisy is not their basic intention. I feel that it was possible for Shātibī to have offered a better ruling than he has even within his maslahā paradigm. He could have said that duress removes any charge of hypocrisy. But the real problem is that Shātibī does not have a convincing reason to say that duress removes hypocrisy. The case turns on whether he wants to give a precautionary estimate of the Lawgiver’s anger at anything resembling hypocrisy via a vis true belief. It seems that he does, that he feels God will be very angry, and that he does not have a convincing reason to think otherwise. Basically, the maslahā paradigm does not empower Shātibī with a clear view of the issue at hand and so it would be difficult for him to be convinced by some other ruling (even if he had made it). This paradigm is drawing Shātibī into difficult or even impossible cost-benefit style calculations of maslahā and mafsadā. How much mafsadā for hypocrisy against truth under duress? We see that the maslahā paradigm needlessly complicates matters and leads to confusion.

I believe it to be quite clear that Shātibī’s result is counterintuitive. Consider an example. Say that an Indian Hindu crosses over the border from India to Pakistan in order to meet some family. On another day, a Pakistani Muslim crosses over in the opposite direction for the same purpose. Pakistani police nab the Hindu while their Indian counterparts nab the Muslim. Both Hindu and Muslim fear for their life having illegally intruded and because they are at the mercy of ordinary policemen who discriminate against the majority religion on the other side of the border. Fearing for life and in the hope of being treated better, the Hindu tells the Pakistani policemen that he is a Muslim (who illegally came from India) and the Muslim tells Indian policemen that he is a Hindu (who illegally came from Pakistan). Both make ardent confessions of hypocritical belief. At a later time, when their case is heard by a Muslim judge who follows the maslahā paradigm, both are sentenced to a year in prison for illegally crossing the border but the Hindu is sentenced to an
additional year for hypocrisy against Islam. Intuitively, this is problematic because hypocrisy is not the basic intention in either case (the intention being simply to save one’s life).

The solution is to see this case from the perspective of the truth paradigm. The non-Muslim is a human being with the potential to pursue and arrive at truth. If he lives he will have the opportunity to pursue and uphold truth (regardless of whether he finally arrives at Islam; think of some of the Westerners that went to Iraq as human shields to avert indiscriminate American bombing). So he should confess Islam to save his life just as the Muslim should utter unbelief to save his, neither confession being unlawful. Both are on a journey to the truth and while the Muslim may be further along in this journey it is also possible that he may not. So we should not concern ourselves with the possibly superior truth preservation skills of the Muslim because they are also possibly inferior. Neither is there any need for complicated cost-benefit style calculations because the primary intent of the Lawgiver is truth preservation not maslahā. In both cases, the confessions are made to save the life of a potential truth seeker. The perspective of truth preservation offers a simple and intuitively compelling solution. Shātibī’s counter-intuitive ruling is the result of want of lucid perspective on the issue that is offered by the truth paradigm.

Another case that Shātibī struggles with is the nikāh al-muhallil (‘marriage of a divorcee with a second husband in order to make remarriage with the first husband lawful’). In a verse that addresses the husband, the Quran sets down the rules that apply after a triple (irrevocable) divorce has occurred (2: 230). It says that after such a divorce the man cannot remarry the woman unless she marries another man who consummates the marriage with her but then later divorces her. Some jurists saw nikāh al-muhallil as an admittedly convoluted but still legal device (hilā) for reuniting a couple that had irrevocably divorced. The gain to believers’ welfare was obvious because a family would be reunited. If the intent of the Lawgiver is maslahā, this would be a good interpretation of the Shari’a. The problem of course is the mockery this legal device makes of marriage. The woman would marry another man with the intention of seeking a divorce so as to be reunited with her former husband. Marriage with the intention of divorce involves hypocrisy vis a vis the institution of marriage. Shātibī rules (with considerable hesitation and reluctance) in favour of the legal device despite the difficulty of working through the colossal maslahā-mafsādā calculus involved. There would be maslahā in reuniting families and mafsādā in the hereafter for hypocrisy against marriage. His result is counterintuitive because in this case we have genuine and deliberate hypocrisy against truth and in contrast to the previous example this is not even a case of duress. Shātibī often rules against such legal devices and so it is difficult to be clear about the basis of this particular decision.

This lack of clarity is, of course, one of the main problems with the maslahā paradigm. Once Shātibī decides that the maslahā lies in reuniting the family then the false intention against marriage becomes, for him, an intention in harmony with God’s because it advances the maslahā (this being God’s primary intent). A move such as this introduces both circularity and relativism. Whenever a person acts on what they see as the maslahā, they act in harmony with God. It seems as though for each case people must decide what the maslahā is and thus what God’s intention is for that case. These are the times one wishes one could follow a simple meaning. And, sure enough, once again our problem is solved if we switch to the truth paradigm. The intent of the Lawgiver and purpose of the law is to preserve and uphold truth. Marriage with the intention of divorce is an intention against the marriage law which, like the rest of the law, is given to us with the purpose of preserving
the truth. So it is an intention to undermine the law that preserves truth. Thus, marriage with false intent is an action that does not preserve truth and so is against the intent of the Lawgiver. As it is an action against the maqāsid al-Shari‘a it is unlawful. And again, the solution is intuitively pleasing. After three successive divorces with the same man, it makes sense that Allah would want the woman to genuinely try another husband to see if things could work out with a different partner. If things genuinely fail to work out with the new partner and the woman starts longing for her former husband then you have a genuine and solid case for reunion.

Where the maslahā paradigm would confuse matters, the truth paradigm can make sense of some important decisions made in early Islam. These are decisions that I believe the vast majority of Muslims continue to see as right. While these decisions are not legal in nature, they are relevant to the question of the intent of the Lawgiver (this last concept being universal and not only legal). The first case is of the fourth Caliph, ‘Ali, who decided to engage in a bloody civil war to defend his right to the caliphate. It is difficult to imagine that he engaged in a complicated maslahā-maidsadā calculation in order to align his intention with that of the Lawgiver. The maslahā would be the preservation of his rightful caliphate and the benefit of this to the future direction of the Islamic state while the mafsadā would be the death of tens of thousands of believers at the hands of other believers. A particularly difficult item to calculate in this case is the mafsadā in the hereafter of killing a believer (for the Quran deliberate killing of a believer sends one to Hell (4: 93)). My sense is that ‘Ali did not engage in such an analysis. Rather, he was working on something like our truth paradigm. ‘Ali’s thought process could be: ‘The intent of the Lawgiver is the preservation and triumph of truth over and above human welfare (maslahā). I stand for truth and my circumstances are unfortunate because the truth demands that believers be killed. So be it.’ This thinking is even starker in the case of the young Companion, ‘Abdullah b. Zubair. A couple of decades after ‘Ali was assassinated he sought to militarily overthrow the un-rightful Umayyyad caliph in Damascus. The odds against his defeating the combined armies of Syria and Iraq were overwhelming. The maslahā seems nowhere in sight. Beyond the killing of believers and the loss of believers’ lives, his almost certain defeat could result in an irrevocable confirmation of Umayyad power (which, in fact, it did). Even so, Ibn Zubair engaged in military confrontation, and I believe that the vast majority of people would say that he did what he had to do – that he followed the right. But the maslahā-mafsadā calculation that would explain his decision is virtually impossible to reconstruct. Here again, the truth paradigm saves us. The Lawgiver’s intent is the preservation and triumph of truth. Ibn Zubair would have had the thought that: ‘Allah wants me to uphold the truth. In my situation, this means speaking and acting truthfully against worldly power and I will lose my life in doing so. The triumph of truth will occur in my mind but not in the world outside. Even so, those who witness my sacrifice will learn of this inner triumph and will follow my example. This means that because of my example the triumph of truth will occur in other minds. People will fight and die for the truth. Within my power, this is the utmost I can do to uphold the truth. Thus, my intention is in harmony with that of the Lawgiver.’

**Literalism: Truth vs. Deen**

Like Shāṭibi, Ramadān Būtī (Chapter 3: Section 4) also belongs to a group of jurists who take God’s primary intent to be masālih ‘ibād (welfare of believers) and, following Ghazali, maintain that welfare is to be considered in relation to five kinds of necessity, namely, religion, life, mind,
offspring, and wealth. In order to attain welfare, these necessities must be fulfilled and should not be compromised. In addition to Shātibī, Būtī, and Ghazali this group also includes Ibn Ashur. All of these jurists agree that it is the necessity for preserving religion (deen) that is the highest of these high priorities50 (of this group Shātibī is the only jurist who does not seem to make an explicit statement in this regard but the tenor of his work suggests that he would be in agreement on the priority of deen). In other words, God’s primary intent is the welfare of believers especially through the preservation of religion. Here we have an opportunity of understanding from a different perspective why it is rather truth preservation that is His primary intent.

There are really two profound methods for making Shātibī’s ‘ibādat /mu’amalât distinction. Two things distinguish an ‘ibadat from a mu’amalat. The first is the non-intelligibility of an ‘illa. The second is the discernibility of divine emotion in the language of the primal sources. If either criterion is met there is no room for ājihād because we are dealing with a symbol. Both these methods are rational and independent of any consideration of Islam as deen. The first is rational because it is reason acknowledging its limits (therefore the claim of non-intelligibility). The second is rational because of the rational trust in an omnipotent being that gives us a concern about any expression of emotion from Him (this has nothing directly to do with Islam as deen). The deen of Islam is an amalgamation of instances of ‘ibādat that are recognized by these two rational methods. For example, my symbolic observance of prayer, fasting, zakāt, haj, riba, hijab and so on is my deen. Thus, Islam as religious culture is defined on the basis of two rational methods. As deen cannot have priority over the basis of deen, God must intend the preservation of the rationality that defines deen prior to His intention to preserve the deen itself. Thus, rationality trumps deen. But there is one more step. According to the group of jurists under consideration, deen was to be preserved for mosālih ‘ibād (believers’ welfare). We can now say that it is rather rationality that has priority over deen and so it is rationality that is to be preserved for believers’ welfare. But if rationality is for believers’ welfare then welfare has priority because rationality is in the service of welfare. This problem can be easily resolved. If, in the first place, believers are believers because of rationality then the welfare under consideration is the welfare of those who are rational or, more precisely, engaged in the rational pursuit of truth. God’s primary intention is the welfare of rational people, or more precisely, of those who pursue and uphold truth through reason. But we must tease away and prioritize between rational truth and people. God’s primary intention is the rational truth not the people. His primary intention is not the welfare of any human being but rather the welfare of any human being that chooses to be rational and He intends their welfare because they choose to be so (if they did not make this choice He would not intend their welfare). Thus, His primary intention is the preservation of rational truth and the welfare of only those who pursue and uphold it (because they choose to do so). So the people only begin to matter when they fall in line with His primary intention of upholding truth.

3. The Liberal-Conservative Spectrum

The liberal end of this hermeneutic spectrum is without a doubt secured by Soroush (Chapter 3: sections 1-3). He wholeheartedly accepts that each of us is constrained by natural epistemological limitations and that each of us can experience merely an aspect of reality. However, such epistemic limits do not force him back onto deep psychology in order to rank religious beliefs from a
psychological standpoint. Rather, he believes that our religious experiences are on par and that religious pluralism is irreducible. But what is more pertinent for our spectrum is that his hermeneutics is also pluralist. The reason is the same, namely, epistemic limits create the conditions for arriving at different valid interpretations. For Sorough, collective reason (not individual psychology) is the final arbiter of what is rational and it grounds justice, democracy, and human rights. Collective reason pushes Islam into a minimalist stance as a skeletal set of beliefs in the one God, divine accountability, and the basic prophetic values of religion, mind, life, progeny and wealth (see last subsection). It stands as an alternative text to the Quran and Sunna, wiping the slate clean of the ancient rules of *fiqh* and itself determining the *fiqh* that must apply to our times. Thus, it is not only an alternative text but in matters of *fiqh* it is a superior text. The new rules established by collective reason are to be in harmony with minimal Islam and that is the only restraint on them. In the spirit of Sorough’s worldview, within the wide parameters of minimal religion different people could subscribe to different rules that would be on par. Thus, Sorough envisions a robust hermeneutical pluralism. Obviously, Sorough talks right passed Būtī (and virtually all of Islamic legal history) when he fails to engage the point that ancient *fiqh* is more than merely a set of positive rules because it is imbued with religious morality and divine symbolism. For Sorough, *fiqh* is empty of any lasting spiritual/moral content and this is why it is dispensable and replaceable with new laws that should reflect new times. At no point does Sorough actually engage the rationale for literalism, viz. the suggestion that our epistemic limits throw us back onto the principle of simplicity and our reading of the text should be simple unless there is sufficient reason to do otherwise. As a result, Sorough never concerns himself with offering sufficient reasons for his departures from literalism. While his worldview has the tremendous advantage of embracing open philosophical inquiry and *ijtiḥād* in all matters, it severs a hermeneutical tie to the text and thus has the serious disadvantage of allowing a strong relativism in Islamic hermeneutics.

To the right of Sorough stands Rahman (Chapter 2) who *literally offers* an alternative text to the Quran and Sunna. This text is the universal moral law and is accessible to individual rather than collective reason. Theologically, Rahman may be bolder than Sorough because he believes that the moral law is a part of God and that our awareness of it is a reading of God’s motivations and intentions. So Rahman is clearly more reluctant to accept our natural epistemological limitations vis a vis God but, even so, he is far more tame when we finally get down to hermeneutics. For hermeneutics, the moral law becomes an eternal guide to interpreting the Quran and Sunna. There is no indication that Rahman wants to do away with ancient *fiqh* altogether *a la* Sorough. The moral law simply gives us the proper perspective for the interpretation of ancient *fiqh*. But even though he does not dispense with ancient *fiqh* altogether, his method does entail a radical re-interpretation. For example, if the Quran literally prohibits interest then the principle of socio-economic justice given by the moral law overrides the literal interpretation. Similarly, if the Quran literally allows polygamy then the principle of egalitarianism given by the moral law overrides the literal interpretation. In other words, individual reason overrides the literal reading through its access to the moral law. But Rahman does not engage the rationale for literalism in the first place. He does not ponder on the fact that it is our epistemic limits that throw us onto the principle of simplicity and that we ought to follow a simple reading unless there is sufficient reason not to. So like Sorough he is not concerned to offer sufficient reasons for his departures from literalism. However, Sorough’s lack of concern came from accepting epistemic limits but asserting that such limits lead to a pluralism of interpretations, while Rahman’s lack of concern comes from his unwillingness to accept
epistemic limits in the first place. Like Soroughsh, Rahman’s worldview has the tremendous advantage of embracing open philosophical inquiry and *jitihād* in all matters. However, it loosens a hermeneutical tie to the text (by allowing the moral law to intervene between interpreter and text) and thus has the disadvantage of allowing for relativism in Islamic hermeneutics. While Rahman seems to believe that the moral law can only be grasped in one way, the principles that he draws from it are those of Western liberalism (socioeconomic justice, egalitarianism, universal freedom) giving us to wonder whether he is reading a transient cultural phenomenon (Western liberalism) into the moral law, that is, whether he is ascribing Western liberal morality to God.

The next three authors in our spectrum are Rida, the present author, and Shātibi, in that order, and each of these offers a theory based on the *maqāsid al-Shari‘a* approach. Rida (Chater 3: Section 4) is to the right of Rahman because he far more down-to-earth regarding the nature of reasoning that overrides literal interpretation. For Rida, it is not a heavenly moral law but rather human necessity and public interest that must override literal readings. For example, interest banking is to be allowed because of its utility, because it allows Muslims to compete economically with non-Muslims. Utility *a la* Rida is much weaker than the moral law *a la* Rahman. Utility, being such a general psychological fact (as in feeling happy), does not seem to have the power to resist the far more focused and deeply-rooted psychology of literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason), a psychology that suggests that there can be no genuine utility without it. The moral law, on the other hand, may be a deeply psychological phenomenon (as Kant had envisaged) and could conceivably pose a formidable challenge to literalism. Rida follows in the footsteps of Soroughsh and Rahman in failing to engage the rationale for literalism. Like them, he is also not concerned with offering sufficient reasons for his departures from literalism but rather simply offers the alternative model that the state will decide because of considerations of general utility when such departures are to be made. Notwithstanding the problems of statecraft, he does not explain the priority of the state over divine revelation.

To the right of Rida, stands my view (Chapter 4: Section 2) of literalism as necessarily linked to open philosophical inquiry. The obvious advantage of this view is that it is powered by the deep psychology of literalism. The bonanza is that literalism discovers truth as the highest value of Islam and thus openly embraces rational philosophical inquiry that is aimed at the attainment of precisely that value. It is this juggernaut of literalism and philosophical inquiry that sets this view apart from the others. Literalism secures the traditional tie to revelation, and so the hermeneutics is faithful to the Islamic character of the Shari‘a and not open to the charge of relativism. Islam is seen as a set of sacred symbols and commands that cannot be overridden by any rational method simply because these symbols and commands are discovered by reason in the first place. The un-readability of God’s mind or the inability to discover an intelligible reason for a given symbol or command means that that symbol or command is eternal (*‘ibādat*) and it is to be understood literally as a matter for simple obedience (*ta’abud*). At the same time, *jitihād* is possible and required in all worldly matters (*mu’amalāt*) where the rationale (*illa*) for an ancient command is discernible and there is sufficient reason to understand the text in a non-literal manner. However, this is precisely not the case with the command to engage in a rational exploration of truth, that is, there can never be a sufficient reason to understand *that* command in a non-literal manner. Literalism gives truth as the primary *maqāsid* of the Lawgiver and so this is eternally the highest priority in a set of eternal priorities. As a result, literalist Islam is in principle the flag bearer of the open philosophical inquiry that gives us
truth. So we have gathered under this view all the advantages of rational inquiry, \textit{ijtihād} in the \textit{mu’amalāt}, and non-relativism in interpretation.

Further to the right we then have Shāṭibī (Chapter 3: Section 4 & Chapter 4: Section 2), who does not link his literalism to philosophical inquiry, though he allows for \textit{ijtihād} in the \textit{mu’amalāt}, and is also faithful to the Islamic character of the Shari’ā and thus not open to the charge of relativism. The reason that Shāṭibī seems to give a cold shoulder to philosophical inquiry may be because he lived in an age when certainty was an attainable desideratum in theology. God’s existence, the Quran’s authorship, and Muhammad’s prophet-hood were all known by the believer with certainty through deductive reasoning (theological arguments were often seen as deductive proofs). Shāṭibī agreed to the certainty of theological knowledge. Chances are that he thought that such certainty was to be attained via deductive reasoning. But given the modern rejection of deductive reasoning in theological matters (Chapter 1), on this view Shāṭibī would seem to be a product of his time. However, as far as \textit{usūl al-fiqh} is concerned, Shāṭibī broke away from the established trend of attaining deductive certainty. He believed that induction must have priority over deduction in determining the purposes of \textit{fiqh}. The purposes of \textit{fiqh} could only be determined by understanding the meaning of the Quran (and all other evidences) seen as a whole so that we do not miss the forest for the trees. In other words, an inductive survey that would allow us to see the pattern in the whole would reveal the overall purpose and intent of the Lawgiver. Thus, Shāṭibī introduced the \textit{maqāṣid} approach in a systematic legal theoretic way so that the \textit{maqāṣid} of Shari’ā derived from the primal sources could illuminate the process of arriving at specific rules. He also introduced an excellent ‘\textit{ibādāt/mu’amalāt} distinction, and in the \textit{mu’amalāt} where the \textit{illā} of a specific rule was discernible one could engage in \textit{ijtihād} deviating from a literal reading in order to fulfil the \textit{illā} in practice. All the while, Shāṭibī remained true to the Islamic character of the law because for the ‘\textit{ibādāt no illā} was discernible and so there could never be a sufficient reason to arrive at a non-literal understanding of Islam’s sacred symbols and commands.

Finally, at the extreme right stands Būṭī (Chapter 3: Section 4) whose theory rejects not only philosophical inquiry but also limits \textit{ijtihād} in the \textit{mu’amalāt}. Though a literalist, Būṭī does not see the value that the Quran places on the rational exploration of truth. As a result, he is open to the criticism made earlier of the \textit{zāhīrī} literalists who also failed to see that the Quran literally established truth as God’s primary purpose. In fact, in defence of his coldness to philosophical inquiry, Būṭī offers a quote from Shāṭibī:

\begin{quote}
If reason is permitted to transcend the source of revelation, it would then be permissible to invalidate the Shari’ā by means of reason – an inconceivable possibility. The very meaning of Shari’ā is to ordain for the subjects certain limits pertaining to their acts, pronouncements and beliefs. Those are Shari’ā’s contents. If reason is permitted to overstep one of these limits, then it can overstep all others, for what is good for one thing is good for that which is analogous to it \textit{(li-mithlihi)}\textsuperscript{52}.
\end{quote}

But the point of this thesis is that ‘if reason is permitted to transcend the source of revelation’ then it will discover the very symbols (limits) that Shāṭibī is concerned for in this passage. Būṭī’s other critical error is to redefine Shāṭibī’s ‘\textit{ibādāt/mu’amalāt} distinction basically rejecting Shāṭibī’s profound reason for making the distinction. Reacting to Rida’s proposal that restricted the domain of the ‘\textit{ibādāt}, Būṭī chooses to see all symbols and commands as imbued with religious morality and
divine symbolism regardless of whether an illā is discernible or not (thus rejecting Shâṭibi’ī’s method). For Bûṭî, in other words, in some sense all of God’s injunctions fall into the ‘ibāḍāt category. But in this he is pushing us towards the view that even the Qur’anic command to write contracts, for example, could be seen as being inviolable, and so a video recording would be a sacrilegious substitute for a written contract. Thus, Bûṭi comes across as a upholding an excessive divine symbolism and a strict literalism. His view is that we should be imbued with religious morality with respect to all of God’s injunctions because it is religious motivation and His injunctions that are the basis of law and life. To uphold an ‘ibāḍāt/mu’āmalāt distinction with the mu’āmalāt as an expansive category is to sanction a Western separation of church and state that is simply unacceptable. Not only does Bûṭi deflate the category of the mu’āmalāt but also limits the ijtihād that is permissible in it by requiring that such ijtihād must occur in harmony with the traditional schools of fiqh. As a result, his excessive divine symbolism and strict literalism could be seen to close the door to even the most reasonable ijtihād. In the end, Bûṭi may simply accept this as a fact about his position but for those seeking an evolution in the law (most all modern scholars) this is a very unsavoury fact. Table 1 offers a convenient summary.

Table 1

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<th>Interpretive Strategy</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
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<td>Soroush</td>
<td>Humanism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahman</td>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rida</td>
<td>Utilitarianism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Author</td>
<td>Literalism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shâṭibi</td>
<td>Literalism</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buti</td>
<td>Literalism</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 We cannot judge the language and grammar of the Quran on the basis of, say, a 7th century or classical Arabic handbook for linguists and grammarians. Given that the language is traditionally seen to be divine we are going to have to give it far more leeway than that. Perhaps broader criteria for judgment could be proposed such as expressiveness and communicative efficacy regardless of whether the text pays any heed (why should it?) to this or that human rule. It is not for us but for the Originator of language to set standards for its use. Given epistemic limits we are severely constrained in passing judgment on how God ought to use language. The point in the main text is that it is rational for us to trust that He does a good job and that in any case this is evident when we read the Quran.
What I have said in the text about the plainness and clarity of the Quran does not at all mean that there are no deeper meanings in it that come to light only after much thoughtful endeavour. Of course there are deeper meanings but my point is only that the Quran is clear about how the reader must seek deeper meaning. Historically, there has been considerable debate about the clarity of the Quran, on the one hand, and its deeper meanings on the other. Much of this debate revolved around a hadith transmitted by the Companion, Abdullah Ibn Masud (d. 652): “The messenger of God said, the Qur’an was sent down in seven ahruf. Each harf has a back (zahr) and a belly (batin)…” As Abu Ja’far al-Tabari (d. 923) explains, the words “each harf has a back (zahr) and a belly (batin)” means that “its back (zahr) is that which becomes apparent (zahir) in recitation and its belly (batin) is its interpretation (ta’wil) which is hidden (batana)” (see Sands, Kristin Zahra, Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’an in Classical Islam, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 8). For me, the point is that the meaning of most of the Quran is apparent (zahir) in recitation though it is possible for a traveller in search of knowledge to seek a deeper interpretation (ta’wil) of it. The further point is that all deeper interpretation (ta’wil) must be compatible with the apparent (zahir) meaning. In saying this, I see the apparent meaning as fixed (this is the meaning that strikes you when you read the words literally) while the deeper meaning is at least elusive. I generally agree with Fakhr al-Din al-Razi’s (d. 1210) attempt to establish guidelines that allow us to determine which meaning to use, apparent or hidden (see Sands, Sufi Commentaries, p. 20). For al-Razi, ‘any expression in the Qur’an that can be interpreted in more than one way must be interpreted by its more probable meaning (rajih) unless there is a clear-cut indicator (dail munfiasil) that demonstrates the absurdity of the apparent sense (zahir).’ (In the language of Chapter 1, we must go with the simple reading unless there is sufficient reason to interpret otherwise.) According to al-Razi, this clear-cut indicator (dail munfiasil) can be either linguistic (lafzi) or rational (‘aqli).’ For example, anthropomorphists seek to validate their beliefs with the apparent sense (zahir) of the verse The Merciful sat upon His throne (20:5). But reason clearly establishes that God cannot be confined in space, and so, according to al-Razi’s principle, there is a clear-cut rational indicator ‘that demonstrates the absurdity of the apparent sense’. For this reason, this verse should be classified as a mutashâbîh (unclear) verse rather than a muhkam (clear) one. This last distinction is discussed below in the main text in Section 1: subsection Symbols of Submission and also in endnote 14. As we saw in the al-Razi example, this distinction is very closely related to the zahir/batîn one. Historically, the point has often been made that the zahir (apparent) and muhkam (clear) meanings are for the vast majority of Muslims while the batîn (hidden) and mutashâbîh (unclear) meanings are for the spiritual elite of Islam (it is usually the Sufis who pressed this point). However, my point is universal in that I assert that no hidden meaning can contradict an apparent one unless, as al-Razi shows, we must abandon the apparent meaning (on the basis of a clear-cut indicator). In none of the cases I discuss in Section 1: subsection Symbols of Submission (pp. 161-3) is there any reason (clear-cut linguistic or rational indicator) to abandon apparent meanings.

3 “Servants” in Encyclopedia of the Qur’an
4 “Verse[s]” in Encyclopedia of the Qur’an
5 ibid.
6 ibid.
7 My hermeneutics does not beg the question of literalism via direct access to God’s intention that the Quran be read in a literal manner. As I believe that the hermeneutical context is governed by strict epistemic limits, it would defeat my purpose to assume or claim such direct access. What I am saying is that when we read the Quran in the context of epistemic limits it is incumbent upon us to read it in a literal manner, and when we do this the text expresses itself very clearly on some basic issues including the master-slave metaphor. The language used in the main text is more natural and less sensitive to this refinement. But to delve deeper into the issue, if there is anything that I am sure of regarding God’s thoughts then it is that He wants me to understand the context in which I am operating. This is the same as saying that he wants me to attain an understanding of truth (in this case, of my context). My point is that once I attain an understanding of my hermeneutical context, I arrive at literalism. So God does intend literalism in this indirect way (via His intention that I understand the truth of my context). A literal reading of the Quran tells me that God does have this high order intention regarding truthful understanding. But, as an aside, I feel that I am sure of it (direct access?) even outside the context of Quranic literalism.
8 An early stimulus to my thinking on symbols in Islam was giving to me by my father.
9 “Verse[s]” in Encyclopedia of the Qur’an
10 ibid.
11 Lane, Edward William. Arabic-English Lexicon, q.v. h.k.m.
12 Kinberg, Leah, “Muhkamât and Mutashâbîhât (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis” in Rippin, Andrew (ed.), The Qur’an: Formative Interpretation, p. 169
Not all authors see the words muhkam̱t and mutashābīhāt as having contrasting meaning. Before discussing this point it will be useful to have a translation of the relevant portion of 3:7: "It is He who hath sent down unto thee the book, wherein are some muhkam̱t verses, they are the foundation of the book; and others are mutashābīhāt. But they whose hearts are perverse will follow that which is mutashābīhāt therein, out of love of schism, and a desire of the interpretation thereof..." Of course a literal reading of the verse gives us a contrast because the muhkam̱t are the foundation of the book while the mutashābīhāt are other (and thus non-foundational) verses. Moreover, the muhkam̱t must be followed while it is only the perverse who follow (give undue significance to) the mutashābīhāt. Thus, a literal reading gives us a contrast of meaning and this is the way the vast majority of interpreters have understood 3:7. But against this, Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi, for example, offers a couple of proposals in which the meaning of this pair of terms is complementary to each other rather than in contrast. The first proposal is that the word mutashābīhāt implies that the verses of the Quran are similar to one another (this is the second meaning of the word) and this reading is supported by verse 39:23 (kitāban mutashābīhan mathāniya) that 'implies that the Qur’an consists of mutashābīhāt only, namely verses that resemble one another in their beauty, and confirm each other’ (Kinberg, “Muhkam̱t and Mutashabihat”, p. 147). Razi connects 39:23 to verse 4:82 that essentially says that there are no contradictions in the Quran and then connects these to verse 11:1 (kitāb ukhmat ayātuhu) that implies that the Quran consists of muhkhāmt only, that is, it contains only sound and eloquent verses. Putting all this together, he arrives at the view that the Quran consists only of sound and eloquent verses that resemble each other in beauty and that confirm and reinforce each other. For Razi, the inimitable (muhkam̱t) verses lacking any contradiction are evidence of the divine origin or miracle of the Quran (see Kinberg, “Muhkam̱t and Mutashabihat”, p. 147). One of the obvious (and fatal) problems with this proposal is that it simply fails to explain why the people who follow the mutashābīhāt should be referred to in 3:7 as being perverse. Razi’s second proposal also suffers the same fate. The muhkhāmt are said to contain basic commandments while the mutashābīhāt are complementary because they contain the practical aspects or details of these commandments (Kinberg, “Muhkam̱t and Mutashabihat”, p. 153). For example, a basic command is to uphold truth and justice while the manner of offering prayers, terms of trading and rates of alms are practical details that serve to uphold these basic values. Again, the problem with this proposal is that it simply fails to explain why the people who follow the mutashābīhāt are called perverse.

Another proposal for interpreting this pair of terms sees them more realistically as having contrasting meaning. In it, the muhkhāmt are abrogating (nāsikhāt) verses while the mutashābīhāt are abrogated (mansūkhāt) verses. This interpretation builds on the meaning of muhkhāmt as firm, established, and decisive which is what the abrogating verses are. However, the basic problem with this proposal is that it is not at all clear why the word mutashābīhāt ('ambiguous, dubious, unclear' or 'similar, look alike') should be interpreted as abrogated. One (not very inspiring) possibility is that the abrogated verse is called mutashābīh because it resembles the muhkhāmt in the way it is read, but differs with regard to its firmness or has an ambiguity with regard to the duration of time for which it applies. But this is obviously a convoluted attempt. In any case, as Kinberg notes, most authors give no reason for the identification muhkhāmt/mutashābīh with nāsikh/mansūkh. Moreover, ‘in the genre dedicated to the abrogating and abrogated verses there is no evidence of this identification: none of the terms is mentioned alongside the terms nāsikh and mansūkh, nor is our verse [3:7] used as a criterion to distinguish between the nāsikh and mansūkh’ (Kinberg, “Muhkam̱t and Mutashabihat”, p. 149-50).

By far the most common reading of this pair of terms is the one used in the main text. It is to see the muhkhāmt as having a natural and obvious meaning and in no need of interpretation in order to be understood while the mutashābīhāt are in need of interpretation if they are to be understood. In the same vein, the muhkhāmt have a single clear meaning while the mutashābīhāt can have various different interpretations and can thereby be the basis of disagreement. As an overall interpretive strategy for the Quran we ought to examine the mutashābīhāt within parameters set by the muhkhāmt, that is, we must allow the muhkhāmt to give clear direction in the search for an overall meaning of the Quran. In other words, the mutashābīhāt ought to be given an interpretation that is consistent with the muhkhāmt. You may have noted that this is almost the same as Razi’s strategy of examining the baṭīn (hidden) of the Quran against the zahir (apparent) and accepting the zahir unless it goes against a clear linguistic or rational indicator (see endnote 3). A general rule we may formulate is to accept the zahir or muhkhāmt meaning as a default unless there is a clear linguistic or rational basis to abandon it. In the language of Chapter 1, we should go with the simple reading unless there is sufficient reason to interpret otherwise.
Before embarking on that task, I should offer a caveat that is in order now that I have introduced the Shari’ā-fiqh distinction. Fiqh may be viewed as an open system that has the potential to reliably track the reality of Shari’ā. While fiqh can never fully capture Shari’ā, it must at least correlate with it in some reliable way. The gap between fiqh and Shari’ā creates the possibility of ījṭāhād, reasoning aimed at bringing the two closer together (or more accurately, bringing fiqh closer to Shari’ā). As events unfold, jurists may come to see that their current fiqh is not optimal for the preservation and pursuit of truth (God’s primary purpose) thus creating a need and an opportunity for ījṭāhād, as a result of which fiqh will track Shari’ā in a more reliable way. However, it is important to see that this dynamic does not open fiqh to the charge of relativism though it does introduce the conditions for a healthy pluralism of fiqh opinions (Hallaq, Shari’ā, p. 82). A group of jurists, known as ‘al-musawwibā’ (The Validators), put forth the view that fiqh rulings are basically the ‘assumptions’ (zunun) of jurists when they reflect on the scripts. While this view is in keeping with our Shari’ā-fiqh distinction, and with a desirable script-human ideas distinction, this group concluded that all juridical opinions are valid no matter how contradictory they may be. The idea was that there are multiple truths that can stand side by side (Auda, Maqāsid al-Shari’ā, pp. 194-5). Such strong relativism is difficult to accept in Quranic interpretation. While there may be genuine disagreement on the various possible strategies for the pursuit of truth, and while such disagreement on strategy could be the basis for a healthy pluralism in fiqh, it would seem that the inter-subjectivity (agreement) vis a vis the goal (truth) eliminates the possibility of the kind of relativism being envisaged.

Rizvi questions my basis for hypothesizing intellectual deterioration at precisely the time when theology and philosophy took off as a result of self-confidence and intellectual vibrancy. But his question can be answered by observing that the intellectual stalwarts of this period were alienated from real political and legal power, and their theoretical creativity in academic fields may have been a direct result of this alienation. The intellectual deterioration that I am referring to was the root cause of the intellectual elite’s loss of legal control of the civilization to the intellectually substandard hadith movement.

As far as authors considered in this thesis are concerned, Shāṭibī has a critical influence on Rashid Rida, Ramadān Būtī, and the present author.

Hallaq, Shari’ā, pp. 81-2; Hallaq, History, p. 164-5.

Auda, Maqāsid al-Shari’ā, pp. 237-8


Auda, Maqāsid al-Shari’ā, p. 21; on inductive corroboration see Hallaq, History, p. 165-6.

Masud, Shāṭibī’s Philosophy, p. 169

Ibid., p. 229

Al-Shāṭibī, al-Muwafaqat, vol. 2, pp. 385-6; for an account of the origins and early uses of maslaḥa see Masud, Shāṭibī’s Philosophy, pp. 135-6.

Masud, Shāṭibī’s Philosophy, p. 209

All known schools of Islamic law and the vast majority of jurists agree that ījṭāhād is necessary because “scripts are limited and events are unlimited”. Islamic law needs to be an open system that has the ability to interact with its environment and the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. For a general note on openness see Auda, Maqāsid al-Shari’ā, p. 47.

Hallaq, History, p. 170.
Comparing nation-state law to the Shari‘a, Hallaq writes: “The state permits and forbids, and when it does the latter, it punishes severely upon infraction. It is not in the least interested in what individuals do outside of its spheres of influence and concern. Islamic law, on the other hand, has an all-encompassing interest in human acts. It organizes them into various categories ranging from the moral to the legal, without however making such distinctions. In fact, there are no words in Arabic, the lingua franca of the law, for the contrastive notions of moral/legal.” (Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 84).

Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 84-6. Hallaq writes: “[Shari‘a] involved a deeply moral community which law, in its operation, took as granted, for it is a truism that the Shari‘a itself was constructed on the assumption that its audiences and consumers were, all along, moral communities and morally grounded individuals... The institution of witnessing would have been meaningless without local knowledge of moral values, custom and social ties. Without such knowledge, the credibility of testimony itself – the lynchpin of the legal process – would have been neither testable nor demonstrable. Rectitude and trustworthiness, themselves the foundations of testimony, constituted the personal moral investment in social ties. To fail their test was to lose social standing and the privileges associated with it. Thus, the communal values of honour, shame, integrity, and socio-religious virtue entered the judicial arena as part of a dialectic with the prescriptive assumptions of fiqh” (Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 543-4).

I thank my brother, Javed Ahmed, for pointing this out to me.

40 Auda, Maqāṣid al-Shari‘a, pp. 206-7. For a note on Muslim acceptance of logic as opposed to metaphysics see Auda, Maqāṣid al-Shari‘a, p. 208-9.

41 For a note on advocacy of open philosophical inquiry by Averroes (Ibn Rushd) see Auda, Maqāṣid al-Shari‘a, p. 210-1.

42 For a description of the virtually identical Mu‘tazili view concerning the primacy of reason see Auda, Maqāṣid al-Shari‘a, p. 79. As Auda explains, the Mu‘tazili view was, for all practical legal purposes, the same as the traditional view. For a description of the traditional view see for example, Hallaq, History, p. 188. However, from a philosophical point of view, the Mu‘tazili view is clearly superior.

43 The balance of reason and revelation in classical Islam seems to have been the result of an accidental confluence of historical factors rather than conscious deliberation. See Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 83, 116, 502-3.

44 Auda, Maqāṣid al-Shari‘a, pp. 22-5, 248-9

45 Masud, Shātibī’s Philosophy, p. 210-1


47 I owe this example to my colleague Omar Raza.

48 Masud, Shātibī’s Philosophy, p. 211


51 One can easily feel the force of Soroush’s critique on this point. In Kantian terms, the Shari‘a is noumenal and fiqh phenomenal, and so there ought to be no immutability in fiqh. In the context of the history of fiqh, such a critique has persuasive power especially when ethics has so often been divorced from an unresponsive practical fiqh. I thank Rizvi for this point.

52 Būtī, Dawāḥīt, pp. 64-5, as cited in Hallaq, Shari‘a, p. 512.
Conclusion

This work has identified various failures of reasoning in the religious sphere. It has attempted to explain precisely what the failures of religious reasoning consist in. To explain what the failures consist in it has made use of the language of rational psychology. This is a psychology that is so deep that it determines what it is to be rational in a context governed by the limitations of knowledge and understanding. Our epistemic limits force us back onto deep psychology and this psychology is the arbiter of rational belief. On the face of it, there are no epistemic limits in understanding, for example, that $2 + 2 = 4$. As a result, deep psychology is not called upon to play an active role in determining the rational belief that this is so. However, if we set out to explain why $2 + 2 = 4$ we would soon enter the domain of mathematical philosophy and find ourselves knocking against our epistemic limits. In the end, the mathematical theory that gives us the truth of this equation is chosen because of its harmony with the human psychology (e.g. logic and simplicity). As a rule, when one begins to explain anything in a deep way one arrives at the limitations of knowledge and understanding and it is at this point that deep psychology becomes the arbiter of rational belief.

The failures of religious reasoning identified in these pages are essentially failures of rational psychology in contexts governed by epistemic limits. Rational religious psychology consists in being faithful to deep psychological principles such as logic, sufficient reason, simplicity, and trust. In Chapter 1: sections 1-4, one of the causes identified for the failure to embrace theism is the absence of a deep awareness of the severe epistemic limits that we confront when understanding universal origins. Given severe limitations of intellect and lifespan, our epistemic limits ought to throw us back onto deep psychology and the principles of sufficient reason and simplicity. A proper appreciation of human psychology and its faithfulness to sufficient reason and simplicity naturally leads to theism – a belief that there is sufficient reason for the existence and design of the universe and that the simple explanation for this is the existence of a self-explained singular perfect being.

As in the Introduction, I follow a logical flow of thought in this Conclusion as well, that is, I am not going to jump from philosophy of religion to Islamic hermeneutics because a discussion on comparative religion logically comes between them. This is because after deciding that one wants to be a theist the next logical thing to do is to decide what kind of theist one wants to be (and obviously not what kind of Muslim one wants to be). As a result, my comments on Chapter 1: sections 1-4 are now followed by comments on Appendix 1 on comparative religion. Our discussion on the Trinity in Appendix 1 is our first engagement with traditional religion. Traditional Christian theism upholds the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. But as both Augustine and Aquinas deeply emphasize, understanding the divine nature is a context governed by strict epistemic limits. Thus, epistemic limits govern not only the context of understanding universal origins but also the context of understanding God’s nature. So it is business as usual and we must fall back onto deep psychology. But here there is a clash of reason and tradition. According to the rational psychology of logic and simplicity, the Trinity cannot be upheld because it is neither logical nor simple. This is
the profoundest of problems (for traditional Christianity) because not only does logic pervade human reasoning, more specifically it is home to the principle of sufficient reason, and both sufficient reason and simplicity ground the existence and attributes (unity/first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator) of the Christian God. So if the Trinity is not in harmony with logic and simplicity, there is a Trinity versus logic/simplicity tension within traditional Christian theism, and because logic and simplicity ground in the first place the very existence and attributes of the Christian God, this is indeed an unspeakably profound tension. The tri-unity is not logical because there cannot be three persons in the being of one God who is at the same time not a collective of persons. Augustine and Aquinas attempt to play with the meaning of the word person but changing the meaning of the word does not change the ground reality in any way. The objection can be framed as follows without using that word. It is not logical to say that there are three self-conscious beings in the being of a God who is not a collective of self-conscious beings. If he were such a collective then Christianity would be a tri-theism - the belief in three self-conscious divine beings - and not a mono-theism. If he were not such a collective then there is only one self-conscious being in God and this would mean that a divine Jesus is the same self-conscious being as the divine Father. But this is the Sabellian heresy, the belief that God transformed himself into the human Jesus who was God-incarnate. Thus, the tri-unity of three divine persons is illogical, and in any case all attempts at resolving the contradiction, as demonstrated by Augustine and Aquinas, will introduce incomprehensible convolutions and be the furthest thing from simplicity. For these reasons, the Trinity is not a genuine contender for our conception of the perfect being in a field where it is in competition with the Jewish/Islamic view of God as an indissoluble personal unity.

But Appendix 1 also considers a possible way to save the Trinity. This is by deploying another deeply psychological principle against logic and simplicity (obviously only a deeply psychological principle can challenge deeply psychological principles such as logic and simplicity). The principle in question is that of sufficient reason and its deployment gives us another excellent illustration of the failure of religious reasoning mentioned above. A sufficient reason for believing in the Trinity would be a divine instruction authentically transmitted. In other words, if God really said that he is a Trinity then that could be a sufficient reason for throwing logic and simplicity to the wind. Appendix 1 explores the New Testament material to discover whether God said this. But the results are highly controversial and for this reason divine instruction cannot be a sufficient reason to block the application of logic and simplicity against the Trinity. The results are controversial because of deep-seated disagreement among the earliest authors of the New Testament. In general, Paul’s account of events is not in agreement with the accounts of Mark, Matthew, and Luke on critical issues regarding Jesus such as his status as Messiah and his Resurrection. So it is as though the inner (psychological) demons of logic and simplicity are in hot pursuit of (belief in) the Trinity and only a clear instruction from God can stop the hunt. But the earliest instructions are muddled and, in fact, whatever sense can be made of them seems to suggest that both the Father and Jesus would be shocked at the basic beliefs of the traditional religion. Far from stopping the hunt, God may be goading the predators. In the end, it may well be that logic, simplicity, and divine revelation, are all in pursuit of the Trinity and the only sufficient reason there is, is for traditional Christians to reconsider their basic beliefs. Some historians who apply a secular approach to history but are also Christian believers (e.g. John Meier and James Dunn) have already started to do this. As a result, a raging postmodern debate has emerged on early Christian history
and historical methodology. The real fault line of this debate does not lie between faith and reason but rather between tradition and reason because it is essentially a debate between traditional faith (e.g. Luke Johnson) and rational faith (Meier/Dunn). In other words, there is faith on both sides of the divide and the real conflict is between the traditional and the rational. The failure of religious reasoning mentioned earlier is on the part of traditional Christians such as Luke Johnson because their tradition seems to blind them to the sufficient reasons in their environment that are knocking on their door and demanding a reconsideration of traditional beliefs.

And, of course, this is precisely the problem with traditional Islam. A tradition-bound Islam fails to be sensitive to sufficient reasons in its environment for breaking away from tradition on any given issue. For example, in the traditional interpretation of Hanafi fiqh, if a husband says the word divorce to his wife three times an irrevocable divorce comes into effect. But there is sufficient reason for those who follow the Hanafi madhab to abandon this traditional interpretation because it goes against a literal reading of the Quran and the interpretation of other schools. Tradition-bound Hanafis are those who fail to be sensitive to such reasons and thus exemplify a failure of religious reasoning. One’s tradition should not blind one to reason.

But the central question for this thesis was whether there is a rational method for Islamic hermeneutics. We began to answer this by observing in Chapter 1: Section 5 that the hermeneutical context of understanding God’s word is governed by strict epistemic limits. Thus, epistemic limits govern not only the philosophical context of understanding universal origins and the theological context of understanding divine nature but also the hermeneutical context of understanding divine revelation. As a result, we have the expected fall back onto deep psychology and its basic principles of simplicity, sufficient reason, and trust. The arguments of Chapter 1: Section 5 aimed to establish that a Betti/Hirsch style literalist hermeneutics is the one that is in harmony with deep psychology. So epistemic limits throw us back onto deep psychology, but then the only hermeneutical strategy that is in harmony with deep psychology is literalism. More specifically, one has to go with a simple, literal reading of the text unless there is sufficient reason to do otherwise. But then the critical thing about this literalism is its sensitivity to sufficient reasons, and it is this rational literalism that was fully elaborated as a hermeneutical strategy in Chapter 4. The literalism in question is not tradition-bound but rather it is open to sufficient reasons in the environment that draw it out of traditional and literal understandings. It is one that is always on the lookout for a sufficient reason not to follow a tradition or apply the literal interpretation in any given case. This openness to reasons is the hallmark of any dynamic culture, a culture that successfully negotiates the transition from old to new or from tradition to modernity.

To be clear, neither tradition nor literalism is a problem in and of themselves. Rather the problem is to be tradition-bound or to follow a tradition-bound literalism when the binding of the tradition is such as to make one unable to think, understand, and act in non-traditional and non-literal ways. The inability to think, understand, and act in non-traditional/non-literal ways makes one unresponsive to sufficient reasons that demand freedom from traditional/literal understandings. So it is critical to bear in mind that neither traditionalism nor literalism per se is a problem. The problem is unresponsiveness to reasons. Both tradition and literalism can be embraced in a rational manner, that is, it is possible to have a rational traditionalism and a rational literalism. These last expressions are simply ways of saying that one’s traditionalism and literalism can be
open to reasons and need not be blind traditionalism/literalism. Thus, because neither tradition nor literalism per se are the problem, a rational traditionalism/literalism will preserve traditional/literal understandings, but if a sufficient reason comes along in the form of changing geographical, socio-political, scientific-technological, or other environmental conditions then the rational traditionalism/literalism always responds by forsaking traditional/literal understandings. Is this not the ancient wisdom of keeping one’s identity while being responsive to changing circumstances?

In order to focus on this difference between rational traditionalism/literalism and blind traditionalism/literalism, Appendix 2 indulges in a retelling of the history of how the hadith movement came to overwhelm the dynamic legal culture of the first Islamic century. As one reads through this history, one realizes that the proponents of hadith-only fiqh had slumped into a tradition-bound literalism. They were no longer on the lookout for sufficient reasons, reasons that demanded the timely response of abandoning literal hadith-based understandings. Such reasons could potentially ensnare an unresponsive community of hadith-bound literalists (and ultimately their entire civilization, as in fact they did). This was also the problem with Shafi’i’s (d. 820) suboptimal synthesis of reason and revelation that was forged under the external pressure of the hadith movement and focused on hadith-based fiqh even though other sources of fiqh such as ‘amāl and ra’y were standing by as sufficient reasons against such a narrow focus. To be fair, in comparison to the tradition-bound literalism of hadith-only fiqh, Shafi’i’s synthesis was not a complete blindfolding of future jurists. Under Shafi’i’s synthesis, jurists could still be responsive to superficial sufficient reasons here and there that would gently nudge and poke them in their state of overall tradition-bound inertia. His synthesis was analogous to a set of blinkers rather than a blindfold so that future jurists would only see superficial - but fail to catch sight of any deep - sufficient reasons coming their way. As a result, jurists after Shafi’i were still capable of superficial course corrections and this probably served as an opiate to the general community that may complacently have come to believe that change was still possible. But the truth was that the blinkers meant that deep course corrections were not really possible anymore. A sufficient reason that challenged any basic traditional fiqhi assumption could no longer be picked up on the juristic radar.

But it is an analysis of Malik (d. 795) that reveals how early the problem arose. We realize that the problem of a blinkered literalism had already taken root well before Shafi’i and that some of Malik’s fiqh fails to forsake the ‘amāl tradition of Medina even when it is clear that Malik had sufficient reason to do so. It is from this discovery (that Malik’s fiqh was bound to the Medinese ‘amāl tradition) that we learn that the problem of blinkered traditionalism/literalism had set in by the first half of 8th century in Medina. True, Shafi’i’s blinkers were hadith-based and Malik’s were ‘amāl-based (and Malik is simply a superior Islamic jurist to Shafi’i) but the real point is that whatever the tradition (hadith or ‘amāl) a tradition-bound jurisprudence was becoming the norm. As I explain in Appendix 2, the second Caliph was also in possession of a traditionalism/literalism, but his traditionalism/literalism was not burdened by the weight of a hundred years of Medinese tradition as was the case with Malik or by a hundred and fifty years of Prophetic hadith transmission as was the case with Shafi’i. As is clear from the judgments that he passed, the second Caliph was acutely aware of sufficient reasons to abandon traditional positions and literal
readings. It is only in the absence of sufficient reasons that he followed a tradition or a literal understanding of text. But this ability that was common among Muslims of the first Islamic century was lost as an unquestioning traditionalism began to set in. There seems to be an inertial tendency in human nature that allows us to become tradition-bound, that dampens the spirit of evolution and change, and blinkers our ability to keep a lookout for sufficient reasons. These are reasons that draw us out of our tradition-bound inertia if we are responsive to them, or, alternatively, ensnare us if we fail to respond in a timely fashion. So the real point of this thesis may be to say that becoming bound by a tradition and numb to reason is an enemy to both traditionalism and literalism.

We have been discussing the error of holding onto traditional/literal understandings despite the presence of sufficient reasons to break away from them. Chapters 2 and 3 discussed the opposite error of abandoning traditional/literal understandings even when there is no sufficient reason to do so. Liberal-minded authors such as Rahman and Soroush are guilty of this second error because of their general impatience with traditionalism and literalism. Before I comment further on these authors, it is useful to get a sense of the proper balance of tradition and reason and once again we can turn to the second Caliph for this sense of balance. I offer the following example of his at the end of Appendix 2. The Prophet had given an order that the blood money (diyat) for a finger is ten camels. ‘Umar did not see that Prophetic order as binding in a rigid way, and seeing with common sense that the thumb and index finger are more useful than the other fingers he wanted to proportionally increase the diyat for them. However, when ‘Umar learned of a Prophetic tradition asserting that all the fingers were of equal value, he withdrew his suggestion. To state the obvious, if the Prophet was right during his own lifetime about the equal value of all the fingers then that judgment would still be right a few years later when ‘Umar was Caliph. As it was the Prophet who declared that to be so, ‘Umar had no rational basis for questioning it. Thus, we find a person sensitive to possible sufficient reasons for questioning any given tradition but also ready to embrace that tradition if he discovers that the possible reasons are not sufficient. In other words, we find a person open to suggestion and willing to apply good sense to any problem but at the same time deeply respectful of tradition. But this is not the case with Rahman and Soroush.

We began to understand the liberal problem in Chapter 1: Section 5 while constructing the hermeneutical context in which the act of textual understanding takes place. The only members of our narrow community of interpretive discourse are rational Muslim theists. Because the philosophical identity of a Muslim interpreter is that of a theist, they implicitly assume the deeply psychological principles (sufficient reason/simplicity/trust) that ground theism. Moreover, their religious identity is that of an Islamic theist, and so they implicitly agree with our earlier critique of Judeo-Christian theism that was based on the very same psychological principles. In addition to all of this, they also have to be aware that strict epistemic limits apply to the context of interpreting divine revelation because such limits play a critical role in arriving at belief in God in the first place (Chapter 1: sections 1-4). We are not in a position to determine what God is thinking or His reasons for sending a revelation because we are not even in a position to ascertain that He exists (epistemic limits, no deductive arguments permissible). We only rationally believe that He does (Chapter 1: sections 1-4). So the hermeneutical context for this narrow discourse community is governed by strict epistemic limits with the resulting fall back onto deep psychology.
Chapter 2 was a discussion of Rahman who offers a deeply flawed theory of hermeneutics precisely because he feels that he can circumvent epistemic limits via a Kantian moral law in order to gain direct access to God’s mind. But as I said, and it bears repeating, while our belief in God is rational, we are not even in a position to ascertain that He exists let alone determine what He is thinking. Given epistemic limits, our default reading of the Quran has to be determined by an application of the principle of simplicity to the cultural-linguistic conventions in which Quranic meanings are embedded. In other words, we have to go with a simple, conventional, and literal reading except in cases where there is sufficient reason to interpret the text otherwise. In general, this was the rationale that I offered for literalism (epistemic limits; simplicity; lack of sufficient reason). But, as I said, Rahman is willing to abandon traditional/literal understandings even in the absence of sufficient reason. In fact, to be more precise, he basically uses the belief that we can overcome epistemic limits as a new kind of sufficient reason to abandon tradition and literalism. His basic reasoning is that because we can (overcome epistemic limits to) objectively understand why God gave a certain rule we will have sufficient reason to abandon that rule when God’s aims are not being fulfilled. In other words, his overcoming of epistemic limits is supplying him with new sufficient reasons for abandoning traditional/literal understandings. The problem is that he is out of sink with the reasoning of the last paragraph because although he is supplying sufficient reasons, he is doing so by unjustifiably tearing down epistemic limits. The proper reasoning (of the last paragraph) is that epistemic limits force us to accept a simple reading when there are no sufficient reasons to do otherwise. Rahman’s method is to say that a lack of epistemic limits give us sufficient reason to reject the simple reading. But how can he credibly justify a lack of epistemic limits in the context of understanding divine revelation? To give an example, Rahman argues that we can lift the literal ban on ribā because God’s aim of socio-economic justice is not being fulfilled by imposing such a ban. Against this, following the essentials of Shātibi’s theory, my view is that there is no way to understand the rationale (illa) for the ban on ribā because what possible divine rationale could there be for literally banning an interest of even one percent. In the spirit of Shātibi, the divine rationale for this is non-intelligible just as it is in the case of having five obligatory prayers rather than say four or six. Rahman is on shaky ground both because of his highly controversial claim that lifting the ban on ribā will advance socio-economic justice and because of his inexplicable confidence in comprehending God’s rationale for the ruling. After all, the ban on ribā may also be intended as a symbol rather than simply a panacea for socio-economic injustice.

We discussed Sorough in Chapter 3: sections 1-3 and discovered that in a sense his hermeneutics is superior Rahman’s because he accepts that there are epistemic limits in reading God’s mind. Having acknowledged limits in understanding the nature and mind of God, Sorough arrives at a hermeneutics that is very different from Rahman’s. While Rahman believes that we are able to authoritatively ascertain the meanings intended by God, Sorough believes that our inability to authoritatively ascertain God’s meanings results in different people arriving at different meanings. So there is no single authoritative way of ascertaining God’s meanings in the manner Rahman meant to suggest. For this reason, our epistemic limits and human fallibility result in an irreducible pluralism, an irreducible diversity of interpretations of religious experiences and religious texts.
In the face of epistemic limits, what Soroush conspicuously fails to do is fall back onto deep psychology and offer a hermeneutical theory that is in harmony with it. In contrast to the literalist Betti/Hirsch strategy, Soroush believes that our epistemic limits and human fallibility lead us to pluralism. But in this move to pluralism, he basically privileges theoretical over practical reason – a very unwise strategy in a realm governed by strict epistemic limits. In other words, when Soroush realizes that there are epistemic limits in arriving at the belief in God, and in understanding His nature, then he ought to switch modes to practical reasoning and explore deep psychological motivations. Instead, he chooses to bask in his epistemic limitations, in the limits of theoretical reason, and decides that human fallibility has to mean that there is an irreducible plurality both in religious experience and textual interpretation. There may be no way to prioritize one experience or interpretation over another and there is nothing for us to do but to embrace this irreducible pluralism. But we saw in Chapter 1: sections 1-4 that there is plenty for us to do in the face of epistemic limits. We face the practical problem of having to decide what to be and what to do within limited resources of time and intellect, and for that we require a deep understanding of our own psychology. Deep psychology is the final arbiter in any context governed by epistemic limits and it allows us to differentiate and evaluate different worldviews. From the standpoint of practical reason, the standpoint of human psychology, not all views are on par and there is no irreducible pluralism. A theism or hermeneutics that is compatible with deep psychology is superior to one that is not.

A serious contradiction lies at the heart of Soroush’s view. The psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity gives him his belief in one God (even if he has independent mystical access to a higher being). Moreover, as a (self-proclaimed) free thinker, he is not simply a Muslim by birth but has independent reasons for being a Muslim rather than a Christian. The psychology of logic, simplicity, and sufficient reason gives him reason to favour the indissoluble unity of Allah over the triune God. Thus, in acquiring his identity as a rational theistic Muslim, Soroush already subscribes to the deep psychology of sufficient reason and simplicity. None of this is said or acknowledged in his work but it is true as long as he believes that he is a rational Muslim theist (which he obviously does). When it comes time to interpret the text of the Quran, he acknowledges epistemic limits and human fallibility but he abandons simplicity and sufficient reason. Instead, he opts for an irreducible pluralism. The problem is: when epistemic limits force us to apply simplicity in order to arrive at the belief in one rather than many gods, why do epistemic limits not force us to apply simplicity in reading the text of the Quran? Why does simplicity apply in the first case but not the second? Why does pluralism apply in the second case but not the first? Why is there not a plurality of gods? Why is pluralism reserved for hermeneutics but not philosophical theology? Where is the consistency? By contrast, this thesis has aimed at consistently applying principles such as simplicity both to theology and hermeneutics.

Thus, Soroush is under an obligation to abandon his pluralistic hermeneutics and read the texts in a simple manner unless he has sufficient reason to do otherwise. But a simple reading of the Quran will demolish the Trinity and Soroush’s irreducible religious pluralism with it. It is not even conceivable that Soroush could propose a sufficient reason for reading the Quran in a non-literal way (on this matter) because for him the Quran is the result of his beloved Prophet’s sublime mystical experiences. The sublime mystic Muhammad may have produced time bound views on
economics and politics but certainly not on the nature of the eternal God. If the Quran says that God is not triune then that is just as true today as it was when Muhammad said it. The problem for Soroush is that the simplicity that gave him his one God will not allow his irreducible religious pluralism and pluralistic hermeneutics to stand.

Neither Rahman nor Soroush offer a sufficient reason for abandoning simple, conventional, and literal interpretations. But to be more precise, as I was in the case of Rahman, the sufficient reasons that they do offer for their departures from literalism are ones that are simply unacceptable. Rahman’s sufficient reason was that we abandon the literal reading because we know God’s intentions directly. Of course I do not deny that direct knowledge of God’s intentions is plenty of reason to abandon the literal text but how on Earth do we know His intentions? Soroush’s sufficient reason seems to be an opposite of this. He feels that we can never really know God’s intentions (he embraces epistemic limits) and this is precisely why the literal reading is only one of many readings that cannot be privileged over each other. My criticism of this is that we should not bask in this way in our epistemic limitations because we must fall back onto deep psychology in order to privilege one interpretation over the others. The privileged interpretation is the simple one unless there is sufficient reason otherwise. For Rahman the absence of epistemic limits is sufficient reason to abandon literalism while for Soroush the presence of epistemic limits is sufficient reason to abandon literalism. The problem with both is contained in the following sentence: epistemic limits are a fact about the human condition (Rahman’s problem) and the rational human response to that fact is deeply psychological (Soroush’s problem).

Juxtaposed to the liberal problem is a tradition-bound literalism that has closed the doors to rational philosophical inquiry. The work of Chapter 4 (and Appendix 2) was to show that the literalism that I am advancing is not tradition-bound and does not entail such an abysmal fate but, on the contrary, it is in deep harmony both with responsiveness in fiqh and rational philosophical inquiry. This is a compelling argument in favour of it. But the question is how is it possible to claim a harmony with philosophy when a literal reading of the Quran gives us the following picture: God is Master, we are slaves, He gives clear orders, and the best of us respond by saying ‘we hear and we obey’. Once we have (rationally) decided that God exists, it is not ours to question why. The primary task of reason is to decide whether God exists and if it is decided that He does, obedience must follow immediately in a literalist manner. So the problem is that this picture of strict literalist obedience seems to leave no room for open philosophical inquiry. But there is a solution. If God’s very command is to pursue rational inquiry then strict obedience of that would result in a religious duty to engage in open philosophical inquiry. A literal reading of the Quran in Chapter 4 gives us a clear sense of what we must take God’s primary command or intention to be. The most important concept in the Quran is that of truth. For the author (i.e. God) truth is more important than anything else. Verses in the Quran literally say that God’s purpose in creating the universe (including humanity) is to hurl truth against falsehood so that falsehood perishes (e.g. 21: 16-8). It follows that God’s purpose in creating the universe and giving us the Shari’a is the preservation and vindication of truth. If that is indeed God’s purpose, this would reconcile a literalist reading of Islamic text with the pursuit of open philosophical inquiry. The literalist reading gives us truth as the highest value while open philosophical inquiry is aimed at the pursuit of precisely that value. Thus, in principle, literalist Islam should cherish, safeguard, and nurture free inquiry more than any
other interpretive strategy or for that matter any other religion or culture in the world. In a sense everyone wins because the conservatives have their literalism while the liberals have their philosophical inquiry. One wonders whether such a solution is possible for any other religious scripture or is it rather specific to the nature of the Quran.

So the fact of critical importance is that a literal reading of the Quran gives us truth as its highest value and conceptual priority. As truth is the highest value on a literal reading, there is no reason to see literalism as an enemy of philosophical inquiry because such inquiry is driven by precisely that value. So we have argued for hermeneutical literalism by severing literalism’s ignominious historical link with a stagnant tradition and creating for it a new link with open philosophical inquiry. Having created the new link we may be reminded that it is precisely philosophical inquiry that led us to theism, to Islam, and then to literalism in the first place. Now, wonder of wonders, the literalism we discovered at the end of the journey has reinforced the spirit of inquiry of the whole journey. We arrived at the literal Quran only to find that it is not a jealous wife and does not mind if we go off on another journey as long as it is in search of the truth. Maybe it is supremely confident that we will be back. Our journey was such that truth and reason provided the basic conceptual framework through which the Quran was discovered. Since the Quran is discovered by reason, it cannot and does not impose limits on reason. Reason must define its own limits. Again, literalist Islam does not impose limits on philosophy but rather philosophy must impose limits upon itself. We have seen that it does so through its rational discovery of a role for divine revelation.
Appendix 1
A Critique of Judeo-Christian Theism

From our discussion in Chapter 1, we critically observe that logic, sufficient reason, and simplicity are the psychological principles on which all theists - including those of Judeo-Christian persuasion – must arrive at their belief in a first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator. Even if they have not explicitly acknowledged or articulated their profound dependence on such principles, this does not change the fact that these principles are the rational basis for establishing the cherished attributes of the Judeo-Christian God (first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator). The point is that invoking such powerful principles (even if not explicitly articulating them) means that they must remain unfailingly faithful to them on pain of inconsistency. But faithfulness to these principles creates a deep tension with central beliefs in Judeo-Christian theism. In this appendix, I will offer two key examples of this tension, the first with a belief that is central to Christian theism and the second with one that is central to Jewish theism. All of this will help us to see in what way psychological principles may clash with the theistic beliefs of a particular tradition thereby potentially disciplining those beliefs and that tradition. It is at least harder to find a significant clash of deep psychology with Islamic theism but there is plenty of tension with Islamic hermeneutics and this is the topic of Chapter 1: sections 5-8 and chapters 2 and 3.

My first example is from Christian theism. In it, both logic and simplicity clash with the Trinity – the belief that there are three persons in the being of God. As we saw in Chapter 1, logic is the natural home of the principle of sufficient reason (pp. 31-4) and this principle in turn grounds arguments for the first cause, necessary being, and intelligent creator, all cherished attributes of the Christian God. Thus, when logic clashes with the Trinity the tension within Christian theism is profound indeed. Similarly, we saw that simplicity gives us a unique first cause/necessary being/intelligent creator. Thus, when simplicity rejects the Trinity we once again have a profound tension within Christian theism. My second example is from Jewish theism. I mentioned in the Introduction (pp. 13-4) that a belief that the perfect being is the moral omnipotent God is an act of trust, that is, the emotion of trust must flow freely in order to arrive at theism. After this act of trust, the deep psychology of trust must always be applied consistently to prophets and revelations. Simply stated, the problem is that if you trust Moses and his God then you must also trust Jesus and his God and Muhammad and his God. As far as their lives and achievements go, all three prophetic figures were driven by a profound conviction in the attainment of moral perfection, this last being the attribute whereby Jewish theists trust Yahweh. But the psychology of trust clashes with Jewish theistic beliefs, in particular the rejection of Jesus and Muhammad as prophets. For Jewish theism, a rejection of the authority of these prophetic figures had the implication of preserving one of the pillars of Jewish faith, namely, the election of Israel by God.
1. Logic and Simplicity versus Trinity

We will begin by taking a detailed overview of the logic-Trinity tension followed by a relatively briefer look at the simplicity-Trinity tension. My final position is that logic and simplicity must discipline Christian theistic belief, and by this I mean that they force a rejection of the Trinity. I withhold judgment as to the strength of my conclusion because this whole exercise is conducted with the purpose of merely demonstrating how psychological principles must be taken into consideration when forming theistic beliefs. The overall structure of my argument against the Trinity is as follows. Logic and simplicity have always been mortal enemies of the Trinity. In order to survive, the Trinity has always counted on a powerful ally - divine revelation authentically transmitted. The word of God was to be the sufficient reason for disallowing a straightforward application of logic and simplicity. The truth was neither logical nor simple and that is precisely how God had willed it. This will of God was made known to us through the Christian tradition and as long as early Christian history remained shrouded in mystery there was always the hope that the Trinity had a powerful ally in revelation. However, in the last couple of centuries, historical research has dissolved much of that mystery, and certainly those aspects of it relevant to the case of the Trinity. The overwhelming historical evidence reveals that the hoped for powerful ally is not an ally at all and could well be yet another mortal enemy! Logic and simplicity must carry the day not only because the historical record offers no sufficient reason to block their application but also because it possibly joins forces with them against a friendless Trinity.

Logic

For centuries dating from Abraham, the Hebrews upheld a radical and austere monotheism because, against all odds, their prophets proclaimed that there is one and only one deity. At least from Old Testament times since Moses (13th century B.C) this unique and singular deity of the Hebrews was called Yahweh who declares unequivocally: ‘I am the Lord and there is no other; there is no God besides Me’ (Isaiah 45:5).¹ Again we read: ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone’ (Deuteronomy 6.4).² This tradition runs in the same vein for 1200 years after Moses until we arrive at the life of Jesus who is born into a Jewish household. Through his lifelong association with the Jewish people and their Temple, Jesus established the fact that his mission was to breathe life back into a Judaism that was immersed in hollow symbols and rituals. In the New Testament, which began to be written a few decades after Jesus had passed, God is referred to by the term Father rather than Yahweh. Before his Ascension, Jesus says: ’Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God”’ (John 20.17) [italics added]. So the Father is the God of Jesus and of all people. He is Yahweh.³

Understandably, it is not easy to plant as radical an innovation as the Trinity in the soil of such a longstanding and deeply rooted monotheist tradition. Jesus and the inner circle of his followers (especially his older companions James and Peter) saw themselves as Jews and never had any intention of becoming an outcast sect. They had become followers of a Jewish rabbi (Jesus) and of the new Jewish sect of the Nazarene. During their lives, the followers of Jesus remained a Jewish sect and it would have been impossible to hold onto that Jewish identity if
they had subscribed to anything resembling the Trinity. In the decades after Jesus, when there is evidence that he was being elevated to supernatural status, it was still not possible for Christians to make a radical departure from Jewish monotheism. The fact of the matter is that even when a departure was finally made it was not an absolute one and this explains the logical contradiction in the Trinity. A bird’s eye view of the historical dynamic is that the Christians always had to keep one leg firmly in the Jewish camp, that is, they could never cast off the monotheism. At the same time, they struggled to establish an independent Christian identity through an elevation of Jesus’ status to that of a god. By the 4th century A.D, Jesus (and the Holy Spirit) finally made the rank of God but the monotheism stuck and this landed Trinitarians in the boiling hot soup of logical contradiction:

(a) There is one and only one God.
(b) The Father is God.
(c) The Son is God.
(d) The Holy Spirit is God.
(e) These three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are numerically distinct.
(f) Conclusion: There are three Gods (b, c, d) but there is one and only one God (a).

The last (italicized) phrase of this contradiction is the Jewish legacy that the Trinitarians failed to shed. This contradiction is embalmed in the Athanasian Creed: ‘So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Spirit Almighty. And yet there are not three Almighty, but one Almighty’. The view that there are three personal Gods in the being of the one and only God is known as Latin Trinitarianism and is famously depicted in the following way.

Figure 1

Latin Trinitarianism

From the standpoint of logic, this is a twisted picture. If the Father is God and the Son is God then the Father is the Son (that is, the identity relation is transitive, if x = God and y = God then x = y). But the Latin Trinity asserts that the Father and Son are distinct. This is logically impossible hence the contradiction. The Latin Trinity maintains that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical and that they are not. This contradiction is embalmed in the doctrine not only of Western Christianity but also of Eastern Orthodox Christianity that also follows the
ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). Given that a logical contradiction came to have such universal acceptance, one is not under an obligation to quell the gut feeling that there is some sort of historical error here, that a crazy mix of 4th century political intrigue, religious extremism and persecution, and all out bloody war brought matters to a point where what came to be written was the product not of divine inspiration but rather of a harassed and tormented human psychology.

In order to find a way out of the contradiction affirmed by Latin Trinitarianism, modern Christian philosophers have proposed a different interpretation of the Trinity. On this view, known as Social Trinitarianism, God is not a person at all but rather a community of divine persons. The God in the center of Figure 1 is not a real person but rather a community shared by the three persons on the periphery of that figure. Much as the football team Manchester United, God is also the name of a collective (he is the team of divine persons). Denying personhood to God finally makes matters crystal clear. Statement (a) that says that there is one and only one God is actually saying that there is one and only one divine community called God. Obviously, Social Trinitarianism completely defeats both the purpose of (a) and the unequivocal intent of the Old Testament to establish one personal being as God. But the fact is that Social Trinitarianism is a logical completion of the Christological project of the first 4 centuries A.D. If Christ is to be elevated to the status of a god then that simply means that there has to be more than one god (as the Father is already a god) and so Jewish monotheism simply has to be jettisoned. For whatever reason, the Christological fathers failed to do this in the 4th century, and modern Christian philosophers are proposing that that unfinished business now be given logical closure. Thus, Social Trinitarianism abandons monotheism and embraces polytheism, a belief in multiple gods, in this case three. It is quite understandable why the 4th century fathers would have been fearful of such a radical declaration, because this proposal radically changes the nature and meaning of Christianity. For one thing, such brave new Christians will have to expunge the Old Testament from their Bible. Oddly, it has even been said that this proposal is not all that radical, and could even be seen to be compatible with Jewish tradition. Yahweh in the Old Testament could be seen as having withheld information about Himself from the Hebrews. The three gods may have chosen not to reveal the fact that Yahweh is not a real person at all – rather he is a committee of three. Understandably this could not go down too well with the Jewish prophets and their followers given the tremendous sacrifices they made for the sake of an absolute monotheism. What need did the three gods have to engage in a deception as profound as this – ‘a deception that makes them look like the Greek gods of old’? Of course, any sort of interpretive spin can be given to the silent texts but it is for us to judge whether any given interpretation has legs to stand on.

Is there any middle ground between the contradiction of Latin Trinitarianism and the polytheism of Social Trinitarianism? The somewhat obvious solution is to follow the spirit of the New Testament and see the Father as God. This would mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit would have to relinquish their status as gods but perhaps a suitable though lesser station could be found for them. This was the 4th century Arian solution and it was rejected as a heresy. Regardless of that historical fate, it is a solution that is compatible with the Old Testament insistence that there is one and only one God and also with a reasonable interpretation of the New Testament (where the Father is the one God). In the New Testament, the Greek term for God, theos, almost always refers to the Father. There are only six verses where theos is ‘certainly’ or ‘very probably’ applied to Jesus. But as Dale Tuggy
observes, ‘in New Testament times, theos was more of a title than the English ‘God’’ that usually acts as a proper name, ‘and so it was less unusual to use it to refer to beings other than God’, for example, it could be applied to ‘men, the gods of polytheism, the devil, and Christ (John 10.33-35, Acts 12.22, Acts 19.26, 2 Corinthians 4.4, John 20.28)’. In any case, as Tuggy observes, the Trinity itself implies an ontological inequality among the three persons because ‘generation’, ‘procession’, and ‘begetting’ relations hold between them. For example, if the Son is begotten from the Father then that implies an inequality between the Father and the Son. So the arrangement being proposed of a first class God and two wonderful but lesser beings is not all that radical (as such inequality is already implicit in the Trinity). In other words, from a purely interpretive standpoint, the solution of seeing the Father as the one and only God of the Hebrews is within easy reach. Maybe sometimes there is a path between a rock and a hard place. However, embarking on such a path means demolishing the Christological councils of the 4th century as artificial constructions on the text of the New Testament. This may not be as iconoclastic as it sounds because if the Arian East of the Roman Empire had got its way, the 4th century Christological councils would have reflected precisely this solution rather than the Trinity. From the standpoint of logic, the 4th century was won by the wrong view (not for the first or last time in history). But that does not change the logical fact that there is no solution in which the Trinity (3 gods in 1) can be saved.

_Simplicity_

Arguments in religious philosophy such as cosmological and teleological arguments point to the existence of a perfect being. These arguments obviously require only the existence of one such being that, furthermore, is an indissoluble unity. From a purely philosophical standpoint it would never occur to any of us that there were _three_ such beings or that there were three persons within the one being. No philosopher would have thought of such an out of the way idea if the Christians had not said it. If anyone had thought of _three_ divine beings then they would also have thought of _four_ and of _four thousand_. There are no _a priori_ grounds for believing in three divine persons.

In spite of the Trinity, there is an amazing overall harmony between the independent human ventures of religion and philosophy that see almost eye to eye on the concept of a perfect being. It is truly amazing that on the subject of God the Hebrew tradition, taken as a whole, is in almost perfect harmony with our philosophical intuitions of a perfect being. The Hebrew tradition assumes and is built upon perfect being, sovereign creator, and divine aseity intuitions. The Hebrew God comes across as a perfect being, a being on whom all others depend but who depends on no one. As sovereign creator, everything that is not God depends on Him for its (continuing) existence. Moreover, as God exists _a se_ He depends on nothing for His existence. This means that He does not exist by the action or permission of any other being. The Hebrew God fits the following definition of ontologically necessary existence:

A divine individual who exists of ontological necessity would be such that there is no cause active or permissive of his existence at any time. But, if he is the creator and sustainer of any universe there may be, any other substance can only exist if he is, at least in part, the cause of its existence. Hence there cannot be, beside an ontologically necessary divine being, another such.
The reason that there cannot be ‘another such’ being is that God, by definition, would have to be the cause of the existence of this other being. Therefore, this other being would not exist at all for it would depend on God for its existence. In other words, it would not be ontologically necessary and so there can at most be one ontologically necessary being, namely, the one and only God. In a defense of the Social Trinity, Richard Swinburne proposes that the Father is both the active and permissive cause of the Son while the Son, because he is also a god, is the permissive cause of the Father.\(^\text{17}\) The main problem with this view is that if the Father has a permissive cause (exists by permission of the Son) then we lose the ontological necessity of the Father and this goes against our strongest perfect being intuitions. If we are willing to ignore voices in the Christian tradition, on the whole, as I have said, the Hebrew tradition asserts the unique existence of an ontologically necessary being. In the Old Testament, Yahweh insists on His absolute uniqueness.

The point of this discussion is to show that from a purely philosophical perspective we cannot entertain the Trinity. It would go against the basic principles of reason that have, in addition to good old logic, guided us thus far, namely, simplicity, sufficient reason, and a healthy respect for our epistemic limits. A unity rather than a trinity honors the principle of simplicity, there is no sufficient reason in philosophy to posit a trinity of divine persons, and it is well beyond our epistemic limits to even discuss the matter of multiple divine persons. In defiance of this, by its nature, the Trinitarian tradition teaches us that a principle such as simplicity is not a reliable guide to truth.\(^\text{18}\) We may feel that it is simple and natural to believe in the existence of a unique and singular God, but the Trinitarian tradition warns us not to follow our intuitions in this matter. The purpose of historical tradition is to protect us from what we would otherwise naturally do. It is to protect us from the pitfalls of a simple (and logical) solution. Now if in defiance of the principles of reason one still wants to insist on the Trinity, then the historical authenticity of the Trinity must, in the least, be beyond question. However, what went on in the Christological councils of the tumultuous 4th century is the furthest thing from unquestionable not least because of the intense involvement of various Roman emperors, the radical opposition between followers of various creeds especially the Nicene and Arian creeds (the Arians were not willing to accept Jesus as God though they saw him as uniquely holy), and the accidents of history that became the chief architects of the final Nicene victory (one example of such an accident is the battle against the Visigoths in Thrace that irreversibly smashed the power of the Arian East\(^\text{19}\)). In simple words, much of what came to be accepted as Christian doctrine at the end of the 4th century was the result of war, politics, and the personal charisma of individual soldiers and bishops.\(^\text{20}\) Historical investigation and rational debate barely had a role let alone a decisive one in the development of this doctrine.

But if the Trinity is to carry the day it will have to be on the back of historical authenticity. Logic and simplicity do not tolerate it. Even if we were willing to be charitable and accept the Latin Trinity as merely an apparent contradiction (rather than the crystal clear contradiction that it actually is), an apparent contradiction is still an apparent falsehood and cannot be given consideration unless it at least has the unequivocal support of historical evidence.\(^\text{21}\) In Section 3, I will argue that the verdict of history is strongly against the Trinity. The very fact that I can make such an argument sound reasonable clearly indicates that the Christian tradition does not offer unequivocal support to the Trinity, and for this reason it cannot be seen as a sufficient reason that blocks the application of logic and simplicity against the Trinity. But the real point of the exercise is to show that if religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, or
Islam live in defiance of deep principles of human psychology then sooner or later those principles will call them to account. Islamic theism is not in open defiance of the psychological principles considered in this thesis although Islamic hermeneutics often is as discussed in Chapter 1: sections 5-8 and chapters 2 and 3. The (Jewish and) Islamic belief in the absolute oneness of God is in compliance with logic and simplicity while the Islamic belief in the prophetic authority of Moses, Jesus and the other prophets is in compliance with the psychology of trust.22

In the following section, I will examine two of the historically most spirited attempts at demonstrating that the Trinity is in harmony with logic and simplicity. Both St. Augustine (5th century) and St. Thomas Aquinas (13th century) read the New Testament from within their milieu, that is, in a literalist manner without differentiating the Gospel material according to authenticity.23 Traditional Christianity has focused on the letters of St. Paul and the Gospel of St. John in order to ground Trinitarian belief because these sources emphasize Jesus’ divine status, base salvation on faith rather than works, and are the source of other basic Christian beliefs. Both Augustine and Aquinas relied especially on the Gospel of John for their Trinitarian belief without sensitivity to (or probably knowledge of) the fact that of the four Gospels this was the last to be written probably as late as the early 2nd century. Both masters were trying to navigate Christian doctrine safely through the heresies of Arianism and Sabellianism. The former maintained that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were three different persons of different substance and that the Father was the one and only God against the Trinitarian view that they were of the same substance and of equal godly status. The latter maintained that they were not three persons at all but were actually the same person taking on different forms against the Trinitarian view that the three persons were not the same person but distinct from each other.

2. Apologia for Trinity

St. Augustine

St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 431 A.D.) attempted a spirited defense of essentially the picture in Figure 1 using the philosophical resources of Neoplatonism. The Neo-Platonic influence on his thought came from the works of Plotinus.24 Thomas Wassmer writes:

The impact of the mind of Plotinus upon the mind of Augustine was a decisive one because Augustine found a very great area of agreement between the teaching of Plotinus and that of the Scriptures as expounded by St. Ambrose, above all the Gospel of St. John. It was their agreement that God is spirit and altogether immaterial, as Plotinus explains, which liberated him from Manichaean materialism. Augustine thought that Plotinus’ teaching about the Divine Mind was identical with that of St. John about the Divine Logos.25

One thing to note from this passage is that Augustine was liberated by Platonic spiritualism, and the immateriality of God is something about which Augustine, St. Ambrose, and Plotinus were in complete agreement. But there is another point that is far more critical for our purposes. Augustine saw that Plotinus’ philosophy was in harmony with the theology of the fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to St. John. But this is no accident because, as we will see later in our historical analysis of the redaction process, the fourth Gospel was an early second
century work by a sophisticated author who was influenced by Hellenistic theology. In contrast, the three synoptic gospels are far more disconnected and unsophisticated productions and for this reason are a far more authentic record of the historical Jesus. Thus, the harmony that Augustine saw at the end of the 4th century was a harmony between Neoplatonism and a not-so-authentic Hellenist inspired record of the life and status of Jesus. So there was a natural harmony waiting to be found, but of course the problem is the historical authenticity of the fourth Gospel. Another serious problem with Augustine’s defense of the Trinity is that the most critical aspects of that defense came in the form of radical departures from Plotinian Neoplatonism. This makes it difficult to argue that he was able to give the Trinity a philosophical foundation in Neoplatonism. Wassmer:

He was always willing to admit the great measure of agreement between himself and Plotinus but the influence was always within the clearly defined limits established by the Scriptures interpreted by Catholic tradition.26

This means that for Augustine, Neoplatonism was in the service of the Christian tradition and this makes the question of the sources of this tradition all the more critical. Problematically, Augustine’s main sources seem to be the fourth Gospel and the ecumenical councils of the 4th century. In other words, he was using Neoplatonism to defend the doctrine given to him by the Church. His defense of the doctrine of Trinity is the most prominent example of this use of Neoplatonism. Wassmer:

Augustine never ceases to stress the Unity of God as the transcendent Principle of all order and number and so of being. This emphasis derives from Plotinus because to be anything other than Absolute Unity is to be an ordered whole of parts and in some sense a unity. Still, in stressing the Unity he equally affirms the Being and the Trinity of God. In considering the Trinity-in-Unity he lays the emphasis on the Unity of the Godhead and not, as the Cappadocian Fathers and the later East, on the Three Divine Persons. Augustine starts from the one and simple divine nature which is the Trinity… This one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Subordinationism is thus rejected because all that is said of God is also said of each and every one of the Persons who are this God. For Augustine true thinking begins and ends in the Trinity. Thus it is only in the Trinity that God creates us and only as Trinity that we can approach Him. The Three Persons have ad extra only one will and operation… Again, the act, which in the Son’s Incarnation, has united the Son to the human nature, thus sending Him into the world, is common to the whole Trinity. Augustine tells us that all that refers to the nature and expresses something absolute must be worded in the singular, since the divine nature, the subject of that absolute, is one.27

It is clear that the uncompromising stress on Absolute Unity is coming from Plotinus and Neoplatonism. But it is equally clear that the idea of Absolute Unity is being co-opted for a different purpose, a purpose that constitutes a radical departure from Plotinus and Neoplatonism. This purpose is that the Trinity is an Absolute Unity. What is going on is a marriage of the Christian tradition and Neoplatonism but it would not be right to say that the Trinity has been given philosophical foundations in Neoplatonism. At most we can say that the Trinity is being discussed in Neoplatonic language. By the force of his will and in Neoplatonic language, Augustine has made the Trinity into an Absolute Unity so that when the Son is sent into the world all the persons of the Trinity are with him (‘the act, which in the Son’s
Incarnation, has united the Son to human nature, thus sending Him into the world, is common to the whole Trinity’). Or said another way, the absolute one God ‘is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost’.

Of course, the natural question that arises is whether the absolute one God is a singular person or not. We know that the divine nature is absolutely one and so it has to be referred to in the singular. We know that the Absolute Unity cannot be compromised in any way and that the merger of its parts is absolute. But in this case, we are threatened with Sabellianism (Modalism), the view that the Father, Son, and Spirit are modes of the same being. In other words, if the unity is absolute then maybe there is only one personal being that sometimes plays the role of the Father, sometimes that of the Son and at other times that of the Holy Spirit. This is what actors do, sometimes this role and sometimes that, all the while being the same person. But Augustine had to account for the real plurality of persons in the Trinity and Sabellianism was a heresy that was to be avoided at all cost. Steering clear of Sabellianism, the problem is that the very fact that the Trinity has parts is a departure (and compromise) from Plotinus’ conception of Absolute Unity. The absolute one God ‘is the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost’ and the reference to three persons *ipso facto* betrays the compromise on Absolute Unity. Augustine attempts to solve this problem through the concept of relations. Wassmer:

> It is in the doctrine of relations in the Trinity that we have the peculiar contribution of Augustine to Trinitarian theology and the principal departures from Plotinus... Since Augustine has affirmed at the very beginning of his Trinitarian explanation that God is strictly one, the principal difficulty was to avoid modalism [Sabellianism] and account for the real plurality of Persons. We are introduced to the concept of relations and told that the Persons are relations and relations are not identified with the substance or the nature since they are not something absolute. On the other hand, these relations are not accidents because they are essential to the nature and like it eternal and necessary... As to the term person, it has been used in the Trinitarian language, for lack of a better term, to designate *three distinct objects*; but like all other terms, it must be understood of God analogically. 28

But if the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are distinct objects (because person is to be understood analogically) that have relations of generation and procession between them (Father generates Son, Holy Spirit proceeds from Father and Son) then are these objects not conscious beings? It is becoming quite impossible to understand what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, if they are not persons. Wassmer may not be accurate in attributing to Augustine the view that ‘Persons are relations’ but this is precisely the proposal offered by St. Thomas Aquinas and we discuss it in detail below. Augustine may feel that our inability to understand what the persons are is part of the mystery of the Trinity-in-Unity but surely his critic will reply that our inability to understand is a sign that the theory is not a good one. In the attempt to impose *absolute* unity on three *distinct* objects there is an irreconcilable tension between the words absolute and distinct. If the unity is absolute how is any distinction maintained. Things get worse when one realizes that each of the objects is an intelligent self-conscious being and can ‘analogically’ be spoken of as a person. But is a person not simply an intelligent self-conscious being so that talk of the members of the Trinity as analogical persons quickly descends into incomprehensibility.
St. Thomas Aquinas

The discussion on Augustine has targeted our inquiry to what has to be the critical question for Trinitarian theology. Is each of the three divine persons a self-conscious being in its own right? In other words, is each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit a person in the conventional sense? If the answer is yes then we have three conscious beings, in other words, God is a committee of three and Christianity is not a mono-theism but rather a tri-theism. If the answer is no then we suddenly find ourselves in profound confusion because if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not persons then what are they? Critically, Aquinas was not willing to abandon the language of personhood but he offered a distinctly unconventional meaning of the word person. He maintained that the divine persons are relations, that a person just is a relation (as opposed to a self-conscious being?). Aquinas’ solution is that there are not three conventional persons in God but rather three relations although each relation is a person (the word person obviously having been co-opted and given a new meaning). By co-opting the word person to mean relation I believe that Aquinas obfuscates the whole matter. Now does this mean that God is only one self-conscious being who has three relations within Him? While this is clearly a return to monotheism the question is whether it is a tenable view of the historical Jesus to say that he is not in any way a person in the conventional sense, that he is not a self-conscious being but rather the name of a relation. But if we allow that in addition to being a relation, Jesus is also a person in the conventional sense, and we also uphold the monotheism at all costs (as traditional Christianity does), then we have accepted the heresy of Sabellianism, namely, that Jesus is not only a person but the very same person as the Father and the Holy Spirit (thereby preserving monotheism). It is only that this singular divine person was incarnated in the form of Jesus for the sake of the earthly mission. After my survey of the solutions on offer, I logically incline to the Arian heresy that maintains that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all conventional persons but only the Father is divine. Arianism solves all the problems because it upholds the monotheism, the personhood of Jesus, and the distinctness of the three holy persons. The divinity of Jesus is lost but, as we see in the next section, the claim that he had divine status is not historically credible in any case.

Why do Trinitarian theologians see relations as the critical concept for illuminating the meaning of the Trinity? The answer is that only relations establish the equal status of the three divine persons. The Father is the Father eternally but he cannot, by definition of the relation of paternity or Fatherhood, be the Father without the Son. As a result, if the Father is eternal then the Son is co-eternal with him (and vice versa). 30 Thus, the concept of relation is pivotal in Trinitarian theology notwithstanding the deeply problematic nature of the co-eternity of the Son. One problem is that in Trinitarian theology the Father generates the Son but such generation cannot have any duration for otherwise the Son would not be co-eternal. Even if it took a nanosecond to generate the Son this would reduce the Son to the status of a second-class god, and this is not the view of traditional Christianity and its defenders - Augustine and Aquinas. 30 The three persons are equal and co-eternal and the fact that the generation proceeds without duration is simply a mystery we cannot understand. Entering items such as generation without duration into the register of mystery is an acceptable strategy for any theory on any subject but it certainly matters how fat your register is compared to that of competing theories on that subject. The Jewish and Islamic view that God is a singular personal being is obviously not burdened with the utter mystery of generation without duration. Stated in stronger terms, is it even a logical possibility for there to be generation (think of the meaning of this word) without change (and all change requires time)? Both Augustine and
Aquinas happily acknowledge that this is a big mystery, that we cannot understand how generation is with God (so the word generation has to be understood analogically), that reason has limits and cannot comprehend the Trinity.\textsuperscript{31} Such a basic point on the limits of reason is also valid for Jewish and Islamic conceptions of God. But this point on epistemic limits is precisely the one that drives home the opposite conclusion. Epistemic limits force us to revert to a psychological standpoint and from that standpoint the Jewish and Islamic theory is both simpler and more logical. This is precisely why the Trinity is such a weak contender as a theory of the nature of the perfect being.

But let’s investigate Aquinas’ theory closely. The eternally insoluble problem of Christian monothesism is that three (conventional) persons are three self-conscious beings that are three gods and this means rejecting mono-theism in favor of tri-theism. One way or another, a distinction between the three divine persons has to be maintained while at the same time avoiding tri-theism. There has to be a real plurality of divine persons but the divine being is also an absolute unity. There is a Trinity-in-Unity – a tri-unity. So it is basically like squaring the circle. Of course, one can square a circle if one simply changes the meaning of the words square and/or circle and both Augustine and Aquinas choose this route by focusing on the meaning of the word person. Let’s begin with a closer look at the 5\textsuperscript{th} century master. Augustine:

> With God, nothing is said under the heading of accident, because he is unchangeable. And yet, not everything that is said of him is said substance-wise. Some things are posited as relations (\textit{ad alicuius}): for instance, the Father is relative to the Son and the Son is relative to the Father, which is not an accident. The one is always Father, the other is always Son... This is why, if being the Father and being the Son is not the same, the substance is nonetheless not different. These appellations do not belong to the order of substance but to that of relation (\textit{relativum}), relation which is not an accident because change is foreign to it.\textsuperscript{32}

Let’s paraphrase this. God is unchangeable or immutable. What this really means is that his \textit{essential} nature is unchangeable or immutable. Now the property of having a relation is accidental, for example, God has the relational property of being the creator of Babar Ahmed. God’s relation to Babar is that of creator and he has the relational property of \textit{being Babar’s creator}. Obviously, this is an accidental property because Babar is not an eternal necessary being and it is possible that God may never have created Babar. Had that been so, God would not have had the relational property of \textit{being Babar’s creator} and so this is an accidental property of God. Obviously, if God had never created Babar this would make no difference to the essence of God for he would still be the same essential God. Thus, when Augustine says that with God ‘nothing is said under the heading of accident’ what he means is that nothing \textit{essential} is said ‘under the heading of accident’. In other words, with the essential God ‘nothing is said under the heading of accident’. The essence of God is unchangeable or immutable. At the same time, with the essential God ‘not everything that is said of him is said substance-wise’. In other words, some things that are said of the essential God are neither accidental nor bear on his substance. This is true of some of God’s relations. For example, God has the relational property of \textit{being the Father of Jesus}. This is not an accidental property because Jesus is an eternal necessary being. At the same time, it is not a substantial property either because the relation of \textit{being the Father} is directed at the person of Jesus rather than at
the substance of God. In the same way, Jesus’ relational property of being the Son is directed at the person of the Father rather than at the substance of God. Such relational properties are neither accidental nor substantial. The beings of the Father and the Son are grounded in the same undifferentiated common substance, that is, they are consubstantial. In other words, the Father and the Son share in the same essence of God, that is, they are coessential. As quoted above: ‘this is why, if being the Father and being the Son is not the same, the substance is nonetheless not different’. The relations of paternity (Fatherhood) and filiation (Son-ship) do not affect the substance of God and despite this still manage to uphold a distinction of persons within God. In this way, Augustine hopes to establish distinction within unity and a real plurality within oneness.

Boethius is a more advanced and lucid exponent of the Augustinian view:

> It cannot be affirmed that a category of relation increases, decreases, or alters in any way the substance of the thing to which it is applied. The category of relation, then, has nothing to do with the essence of the substance; it simply denotes a condition of relativity, and that not necessarily to something else, but sometimes to the subject itself... Accordingly those predicates which do not denote the essential nature of a thing cannot alter, change, or disturb its nature in any way. Wherefore if Father and Son are predicates of relation, and, as we have said, have no other difference but that of relation... it will effect no real difference in its subject... the plurality of the Trinity is secured through the category of relation, and the unity is maintained through the fact that there is no difference of substance, ... So then, the category of substance preserves the Unity, that of relation brings about the Trinity. Hence only terms belonging to relation may be applied singly to each.33

Paraphrasing, the three divine persons are of the same substance or essence but are at the same time distinct by way of the relations between them. In other words, the unity of the divine essence is absolutely identical in each of the divine persons and the distinction (relations) between them is external and does not affect the essential unity of the three persons. In other words, the relations are extrinsic and not of the order of essence and do not touch the essential unity of God.34 So there is Unity (consubstantial, coessential persons) and Trinity (distinct relations of paternity, filiation, and procession).

This Augustinian view was seen to suffer from two serious problems. First, if the relations are external or extrinsic then there is a question as to the reality of the distinction between the persons.35 How real is this distinction and if it is not real, then have we not slid into the Sabellian heresy that there is only one personal God that takes on various forms? Second, if the relations are external or extrinsic then the divine persons will be different from their relative properties, for example, the Father will be different from his paternity (because paternity is an external relation) and such difference is not compatible with an acceptable view of divine simplicity.36

But more important than either of these problems is Augustine’s answer to our critical question. Is each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit a self-conscious being in his own right? If they all have the same substance or essence then one imagines that they are simply a single consciousness, understanding, motivation, and will, that is, they are really one conventional person. Augustine:
In this Trinity, when we speak of the person of the Father,... we mean nothing other than the substance of the Father. ... Person is an absolute term [ad se dicitur] and not a term which is relative to the Son or the Holy Spirit, like absolute terms such as: God, great, good, just, and other qualitatives of that kind... If one asks oneself, three whats? Human language is too bare to say. But one can reply: three persons, less in order to say what is there than in order not to be reduced to silence.37

So the person of the Father is the very substance or essence of God and the same is true of the persons of the Son and Holy Spirit. Person is an absolute not relative term. Person of the Son does not mean something other than person of the Holy Spirit just as the greatness or goodness of the Son does not mean something other than that of the Holy Spirit. In answering the question ‘three whats’, Augustine is willing to say three persons but that is merely a way of speaking (‘less in order to say what is there than in order not to be reduced to silence’) because in fact there is only one absolute substance, essence, and person. But in saying all of this, Augustine has rapidly descended into the Sabellian heresy that there is only one divine person who plays different roles. As we know independently that he rejects that heresy, at the end of the day he has failed to offer a solution to the Trinity-in-Unity. Can Aquinas do better?

The question that stays with us is what are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit if they are not conventional persons, that is, if they are not self-conscious beings? Aquinas offers a blazingly simple solution to all of these problems. He declares that the relations are not in any way external or extrinsic because the relations just are the divine persons!38 The relations of paternity, filiation, and procession just are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively.39 Fatherhood (paternity) is the Father and the Father is Fatherhood (paternity).40 Thus, in answer to the problem of whether the distinction between persons is real, Aquinas can say that the distinction is as real as it can be because it is embedded in each of the divine persons that are identical to God’s essence. In other words, it is an essential distinction. In answer to the problem that, against divine simplicity, the divine persons are different from their relative properties, Aquinas can say that the persons (e.g. Father) are in no way different from their relative properties (e.g. paternity) because they just are those relative properties!

Obviously, Aquinas is not using a conventional meaning of the word person. His claim is that the right way to apply the word person to the divine is to see that a person just is a relative property.41 This is a radical break from convention because there is no instance in the world where we take person to mean relative property. A person is quite simply not a property. Rather it is a self-conscious being. To be sure, Aquinas arrives at this person-relation identity by observing that the essential God does not have accidental properties and, in order to uphold both a real distinction of persons and divine simplicity, any relational property that the Father or Son have must be identical to their essence. But in arguing that relations (paternity, filiation, procession) are identical to the divine persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) that are identical to the divine essence, Aquinas faces two insoluble problems. The first is that if everything is identical to the divine essence by way of divine simplicity then how is any distinction maintained?42 If paternity is identical to the Father who is identical to God’s essence that is in turn identical to the Son who is identical to filiation then why is paternity not identical to filiation?43 Aquinas establishes the real distinction of persons via relations that are distinct and so paternity is not filiation but transitivity gives us the opposite result viz. paternity is filiation. So Aquinas has made no progress vis a vis the problem of transitivity (p. 201).
second problem is that if the relations are identical to each of the divine persons then what does Aquinas plan to do with the self-consciousness of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit? One imagines that he does not want to say that a relative property is also a self-conscious being. Fatherhood is the Father who is God but which of these beings is self-conscious? Is it only the Father and God because the Father is identical to God’s essence and God is self-conscious? But then in what way is Fatherhood that is identical to the Father and God’s essence a self-conscious being? How is Fatherhood literally personified in the Father? And it is not only the relation of paternity that is personified in the Father but also the relation of ‘spiration’ (procession of Holy Spirit) because the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Father. Paternity is the Father and ‘spiration’ is also the Father. And the climactic paradox is that ‘spiration’ is not only identical to the Father but also to the Son! This is because the Holy Spirit proceeds from both of them. As I have said, Aquinas has come to terms with our inability to understand any of this. He wants to enter this utterly incredible view of divine simplicity into the register of Trinitarian mystery where his view of generation without duration was also entered. But as we have already observed, the manner the register the less competitive Aquinas’ perfect being theory.

All three divine persons seem to be identical to a single divine consciousness, understanding, and will that is identical to the essence or substance of God, and each of the relations (paternity, filiation, procession) is also identical to this single divine consciousness. Thus, Aquinas’ answer to the question of the number of conventional persons (self-conscious beings) in God is simply one. But then was the historical Jesus not a conventional person? We seem to have descended rapidly into the Sabellian heresy because if there is only a single divine consciousness then the historical Jesus, who was obviously a conscious person, had to be God-incarnate. We come to realize that neither Augustine nor Aquinas have a compelling response to the Sabellian heresy. The absolute unity that they insist on seems to have the logical conclusion that there is a single divine consciousness, understanding, and will. In other words, there is a single divine person unless you change the meaning of the word person to mean something other than a self-conscious being. But even when you change the meaning, you must acknowledge that in its conventional meaning there is only one person in the being of God. As I said, one can square the circle if a circle is taken to mean something other than the visible shape of the sun but even if the word means something new there is no change to the ground reality. You still have not squared the circle when you are reminded of the old meaning of the word circle as the visible shape of the sun.

Aquinas seems quite simply to have redefined the word person to mean relative property. But he struggles to maintain a minimal distinction between the words person and relation in order to maintain a minimum distinction in the being of God. The minimal distinction is that although these words designate the same reality they signify that reality in different ways. Let me explain. A relation has two aspects: 1) pure connectivity or interconnection or reference to other; 2) the being of the relation, the very existence of the relation. For Aquinas, persons are relations but they signify aspect 2 of a relation, that is, the word person signifies the being of the relation rather than its interconnection with something else. Because of this, the word person signifies a subsisting (divine) existent or concrete subject such as the Father or the Son. The word relation, on the other hand, signifies aspect 1 of a relation, that is, interconnection or pure connectivity to something else rather than the being of a relation. So the word relation signifies Fatherhood rather than the Father while the word person signifies
the Father rather than Fatherhood. As a result, although both words (person and relation) designate the same reality (of the Father) they signify this reality in different ways thus maintaining a minimal distinction between them. So even though persons are relations these words signify in different ways. When we say that the Father is a person we are signifying the concrete subject rather than its connection to the Son. When we say that Fatherhood is a relation we are signifying the connection to the Son rather than the concrete subject. At this point, Aquinas attempts the mysterious integration that we are speaking of and declares that the person is a relation, viz. the Father is Fatherhood. But if the Father signifies a concrete subject while Fatherhood signifies connection to the Son then how should we understand the absolute integration of these concepts.

The problem Aquinas was trying to solve was that the divine person is different from the relative property, and he wanted to be rid of this difference because it is not in keeping with divine simplicity. His solution was to say that the divine person just is the relative property but even if we grant that how does it in any way change the situation on the ground. Before this, they were different words referring to different things. Now, they are synonyms but they signify different things. So it is all just word play that seems to have no traction with ground reality and Aquinas has blissfully recorded this lack of traction in the register of mystery. Despite his sleight of hand (keep your eye on the ball), Aquinas has not distracted us from the fatal objection. Let’s focus on what the words designate rather than what they signify. If Fatherhood (relation) designates the reality of the Father (regardless of the fact that it also signifies connection to the Son), and if the Father (person) also designates the reality of the Father (regardless of the fact that it does not signify connection to the Son), and if the Father is in essence and substance the same reality as the Son (coessential, consubstantial), then Fatherhood and the Father also designate the reality of the Son (regardless of what they may also signify). So Fatherhood designates the same essential reality, namely, both Father and Son, or, alternatively, Fatherhood and the Father both designate the reality of the Son, and all of this simply means that the Father and the Son are the same object being designated, the same concrete subject, the same self-consciousness, understanding, and will, in other words, they are the self-same conventional person. As much as Aquinas would love to break free, he is still glued to the Sabellian heresy. Figure 2 illustrates Aquinas’ progress (of lack thereof) on the problems posed by Figure 1.
3. Survey of Historians

If the Trinity does not stand on logical ground, if it is essentially an illogical concept, then acceptance of it, if at all, can only be through faith. What I mean by faith is not blind faith but rather scriptural evidence that God has insisted on his tri-personhood. It is only the word of God that can provide a sufficient reason to set aside logic and simplicity in the final acceptance of Trinitarian faith. Only God’s word can force an acceptance of the Trinity over the deep power of human psychology. The question for this section is whether God’s word reliably and unequivocally stands behind the Trinity. But if we discover that it does not, that it is highly controversial to say that God communicated his Trinitarian nature to man, then we must reject the Trinity as an ill-conceived concept that is neither simple nor logical. This is really the only way to maintain the coherence and rationality of our overall belief system. In order to investigate this history we will first embark on a survey of historians of Christianity in order to get a sense of who should be trusted with the sensitive task of guiding us through the labyrinth of doctrinal development in early Christianity.

The historians’ investigation of the Trinity can be seen to revolve around an exploration of Jesus’ status as purely human or rather in some sense also divine. If there is historical evidence for Jesus’ divinity then such evidence obviously supports the Trinity. On the other hand, if
there is evidence that Jesus was no more than a natural human being then it will obviously count against the Trinity. The spectrum of historians ranges from liberal to conservative to traditional. At the liberal end of the spectrum we have 17th, 18th and 19th century historians such as Spinoza, Reimarus and Strauss but also the contemporary figure of Crossan. The conservatives in the middle of the spectrum are represented by the modern historians Sanders, Meier, and Dunn. Lastly, Johnson stands alone at the traditional end of the spectrum as the representative of a historical methodology that is more faith-based than it is rigorous.

**Enlightenment Historians: Spinoza, Reimarus, Strauss**
The Dutch rationalist philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), subscribed to a form of scientific naturalism. In Spinoza’s view, the religion of his time had become “a mere compound of credulity and prejudices,” which “degrade man from rational being to beast” and “completely stifle” rational judgment. Spinoza openly rejected the possibility of miracles. But surprisingly he argued this not on the basis that there is no God but rather on the basis that there is one. For Spinoza miracles were incompatible with theism. In explanation of this, he said that the occurrence of miracles is a violation of universal natural laws that are necessarily true. The truth of the laws had to be established by ‘divine decree’ but if a miracle were to occur it would also be by ‘divine decree’. In other words, a miracle would ‘both be by divine decree and violate laws of nature that are also by divine decree’.

Therefore a miracle would mean God is acting against His own nature, which Spinoza characterizes as ‘divine inconsistency’. He renders absurd the notion that God would act inconsistently, Spinoza aimed to ‘lay the foundations for a thoroughly naturalistic approach to historical studies’. From the standpoint of his scientific naturalism, Spinoza insisted that ‘historians who employ proper methods do not emerge from the examination of history with the discovery that no miracles have occurred, but rather bring to the study of history the certain knowledge that none has occurred’. He openly rejects miracles and is deeply skeptical of the miracle stories related by many ancient authors. For him the historical question is why such authors related false stories. Spinoza has a naturalistic platform that ironically reinforces the authority and divinity of God, even though he clearly believes that miracles are a product of falsification and delusion on behalf of those who came up with them or supported them later on. His God was legally bound by a set of natural laws which undermine the miracles within the New Testament.

Reimarus (1694-1768) follows in the spirit of Spinoza to ‘lay the foundations for a thoroughly naturalistic approach to historical studies’. He distinguished sharply between Jesus in the New Testament and the historical Jesus claiming that 18th century Christian faith ‘could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth’. The real Jesus was a ‘teacher of rational, practical religion, who may have thought of himself as a political messiah, but did not think of himself as divine; rather, he was a faithful Jew, who intended that his followers should also remain Jews’. Jesus was a person cognizant and sensitive to his socio-political environment especially the Roman occupation of Judea. There were no “mysteries” in his teaching and the coming of the kingdom of God and the eschatological message were expressions of the aspiration that God would help the Jews gain temporal and political liberation from Rome. So Reimarus’ view is that the historical Jesus can really only bear the weight of being a politically aware though spiritually elevated Jewish reformer.
But how was the Christian faith constructed on the historical record of such a down-to-earth real life person? Reimarus’ answer is that it is the New Testament authors who created the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history, and in this he is rightly credited for being the first to introduce this central modern theme into New Testament criticism. Jesus did not leave a written record of his own and those who did distorted his message beyond recognition. Reimarus believed that the resurrection was simply invented as an expediency of theological interpretation, as were the ideas that he is the Savior, the hoped-for Messiah, and the Son of God. Reimarus believed that the New Testament authors engaged in ‘intentional, deliberate fabrication’ to pass off their accounts as straight history.55

While acknowledging Reimarus’ seminal contribution of shining a light on the split between history and faith, the modern historian N. T. Wright perceives his intentions towards Christianity to be destructive. Wright asserts that Reimarus’ “aim seems to have been to destroy Christianity (as he knew it) at its root, by showing that it rested on historical distortion and fantasy”56. As Wright explains, Reimarus “claimed that the gospels were records of early Christian faith, not transcripts of history, and that when we study the actual history we discover a very different picture”57. That picture seems to be that “Jesus was no more than a Jewish revolutionary, the gospels hushed this up in the interests of the new religion”58. The discovery of this historical reality was to disenchant the Christian believer so that he may “turn away from orthodox theology and discover a new freedom”59. Even so, Wright believes that Reimarus, despite his intentions, has done a tremendous service to Christianity because he has ‘pulled back the curtain’ to ‘discern… the buried treasure of the gospel’60. As a modern historian, Wright feels that this historical rigor cannot be compromised in the search for the origins of faith. Thus, Reimarus’ greatest contribution may be a relentless skepticism of the historical basis of faith grounded in an attempt to establish a historically rigorous methodology.

Strauss (1808-1874) continues the tradition of aspiring to historical rigor as part of his larger project of bringing ‘Christianity into line with rationalism’61. He ‘proposed that any narrative should be rejected as nonhistorical if it is inconsistent with itself… or if the events depicted in it violate known natural laws’62. While Spinoza, Reimarus, and Strauss all believed that the miracles in the New Testament did not occur, Strauss differed from Reimarus in the latter’s view that the New Testament authors were lying. Rather, he believed that the only way to understand the incredible stories and irresolvable contradictions in the New Testament is to see that the ancient authors never intended to write history. The actual intention was to construct a mythology that would convey eternal spiritual truths. As Raymond Martin explains:

Reimarus and Strauss thus had radically different views of the intentions of the authors of the New Testament Gospels. Reimarus assumed that they intended to be writing histories, or at least intended that their Gospels be read as histories. His explanation of why they said false things, such as that Jesus worked miracles when in fact he did not, was that they were lying. Strauss, on the other hand, rather than accusing the New Testament authors of lying, simply rejected the assumption that they intended to be writing histories. His view was that they intended to be writing “sacred myth”. His explanation of why they said things that they knew were not literally true was that they were intentionally creating a mythology in order to convey a deeper spiritual truth.53
Given this view, Strauss saw the attempts by earlier authors to explain the miracles naturalistically as “ridiculous”. There were no miracles but only myth-making and the Gospel narratives were “sacred legend” not “true history” 64. The question is whether we should see Strauss as offering a credible theory of early Christian history. Clearly Strauss has captured a distinctly possible truth, if we grant (as we should) that Hellenistic culture (and thus possibly Greek mythology) had a significant influence on the early development of Christianity. The modern liberal historian John Dominic Crossan (discussed further below) draws a similar connection between mythologies and histories. He mentions Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, “Virgil imagined that Julius’ father had been Aeneas, who was himself the son of a human father and a divine mother”. Crossan offers the speculation that “if Virgil and presumably his audience preferred mythology to history, even when the history was well known, why not also Luke?” This question harks back to Crossan’s view that Luke’s story “about the journey to and from Nazareth for census and tax regulation is “pure fiction”65. He also has the view that Mark (and following him Matthew and Luke) bequeathed to subsequent history an account of Jesus which, though beguilingly attractive, is fundamentally fictitious66. It should not be a surprise that a liberal historian portrays Luke’s story as “pure fiction” especially when a conservative historian such as E.P. Sanders sees certain sources as rather “inventive”.

The influence of Hellenistic culture in general on the development of early Christian doctrine is undeniable given the Hellenistic origins and/or sensibilities of some of the New Testament authors such as Paul and John, or, even more critically, given the deep influence of Neoplatonism on the Church fathers of the first four centuries.67 But here we are concerned more specifically with the influence of Greek mythology and possibly Greek tragedy on the story of Jesus. It is quite easy to see parallels of Jesus with Greek figures and stories. For example, Dionysus the son of Zeus presents a conspicuous parallel to Jesus the Son of the Father in Heaven. 68 As both Dionysus and Jesus are seen as descended from gods, it is possible that a Dionysus-like myth could have influenced the writing of the Jesus story in a Hellenistic milieu.

It is important to acknowledge intercultural influence in the development of religions. The invading Greeks (332 B.C) under Alexander thought that the Egyptian gods were the same as Greek gods but in a different guise.69 That some gods had Egyptian bodies and Greek faces is also testimony to such intercultural influence. The triadic grouping of gods is known to be an ‘early and persistent tradition in the religion of Ancient Egypt. The best-known example is perhaps that of Osiris, Isis, and Horus, and the relationship within the triad is often on a family basis of father, mother, and child70. Griffiths notes that ‘the triadic groups are so conspicuous at all times in dynastic Egypt that they must be faced ... as an inescapable fact of the situation’ and ‘a result of the prominence of this structural element in Egyptian religion has been the suggestion of some scholars, notably the late Siegfried Morenz, that Egypt may well have influenced, in this matter, the formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity’71.

But additionally, Greek tragedy may have played a significant role in Christian development, because the tragic element may have left its imprint on the Jesus story. There is the possibility that long existing tragic genre influenced the buildup of Christianity because numerous Greek stories are embedded with such elements. Aristotle sketched an outline of ‘tragedy’ as that which refers to ‘an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude, it employs language that has been artistically employed...’72 Long before Jesus, Greek tragedy
had evolved through various theatrical interpretations. Tragic characters tend to have worthwhile goals but this later causes them to suffer some great misfortune. They go through a phase or process of catharsis and they experience hamartia which is a tragic flaw. ‘Jesus manages to encompass all these features, not only does he reflect the persona of a tragic protagonist but he also encounters a wretched fate.”73 Jesus ultimately wanted to lead his people to an acceptable way of life characterized by inclusiveness and equality. In this, his ambitions were no less than those of the kings and sons of Greek mythology. But despite his striving for good, he met a terrible fate. His end is utterly appalling which ‘clears him of the tragic protagonist test’74.

Jesus experiences hamartia and this is something every Greek tragic character goes through, his tragic flaw being the nobility to guide people. His eventual death was caused due to his tragic flaw or miscalculation (hamartia) and therefore one could classify him amongst the many Greek protagonists. Even though it may be difficult to allow for actual Greek influence without any archaeological evidence, nonetheless numerous similarities are cause to make one think that there might have been a connection.

Modern Historians: Sanders, Meier, Dunn, Crossan, Johnson
In the next section, we will make plentiful use of Sanders’ research (without necessarily agreeing with his conclusions) for the simple reason that he is a contemporary academic historian who is mindful of the demands of historical rigor but sympathetic to the narrative that he is studying. His work is methodological in that he considers the most secure information first before moving on to less secure knowledge. Raymond Martin offers a philosophical overview of the methods of current research in early Christian history (The Elusive Messiah, 2000) and comments on Sanders’ self-understanding of his method:

Sanders says that he starts with what he takes to be the most secure information, builds on that the main outlines of an interpretation, and then proceeds slowly to what is the next most secure information, and so on, elaborating his interpretation as he goes.75

In fact, Sanders begins his two main portraits of Jesus in Jesus and Judaism (1985) and The Historical Figure of Jesus (1993) with a list of what he regards as “almost indisputable facts.” In the earlier book only eight items made the list.76 He is reluctant to offer a full portrait of Jesus because the evidential basis for such a portrait is meager. Martin:

Sanders, who is notable among Jesus scholars for his clarity and precision, writes in an academic style. He is reluctant to portray Jesus as a whole person. Compared to some other scholars whose views we shall consider, he tends to hold back, often hedging his bets. He compares himself to a reconstructive surgeon, but one who has no picture of the previously whole person that he can use to guide his task. He says that although he will do what he can to fill in gaps and make coherent sense of bits and pieces of information, the results will be “partial at best,” and that a “true title” of his project would be “basic information about Jesus: important aspects of what he did, what he thought, and what others thought of him.”77
Our reason for making use of Sanders’ research is precisely this principled historical methodology. In this, Sanders’ follows in the spirit of the Enlightenment historians discussed earlier especially in Reimarus’ path of distinguishing history and faith. But Sanders has the added advantage of being sympathetic to the material that he studies. He is not an uncompromising scientific naturalist in the manner of Spinoza although in the end it counts seriously against him that he fails to fully liberate himself from Spinoza’s project of laying the ‘foundations for a thoroughly naturalistic approach to historical studies’. For example, Sanders ‘thinks of the world as a closed causal system that is not subject to any “other-worldly” interferences’79. On this basis, he declares that he agrees with Cicero’s view that there are no miracles.79 Thus, Sanders, though methodological, is still a naturalist. Even so, his naturalism is not of a rigid variety. He denies that Jesus was a magician and thinks of him as a miracle worker, a person who was especially pious or gifted and was believed to have ‘special spiritual powers to influence God’80. This is more open minded that Spinoza’s dictum that ‘historians who employ proper methods do not emerge from the examination of history with the discovery that no miracles have occurred, but rather bring to the study of history the certain knowledge that none has occurred’. Moreover, Sanders feels that prophet is ‘the best label for Jesus’ and he stresses that ‘Jesus was not just a teacher or a moralist but also a healer, and especially an exorcist’81. So Jesus is an exorcist, miracle worker, and quite possibly a prophet of God and all of this is a very far cry from the austere naturalism of the old guard, namely, Spinoza and Reimarus. Martin:

The clearest and perhaps most important point to keep in mind, Sanders says, is that Jesus regarded himself as having full authority to speak and act on behalf of God. In the views of Jesus and his followers, his authority was not mediated either by any human organization or by scripture. Jesus, acting as a charismatic and autonomous prophet, said, in effect, “Give up everything you have and follow me, because I am God’s agent.”82

Sanders also places much greater faith in the canonical sources of the Christian tradition than either Reimarus or Strauss. Sanders’ faith in the sources can be explained by the great importance that he assigns to the overall context of Jesus’ mission. Beyond the background context of the political setting and the religion of Judaism there was the theological context of salvation history and Jesus’ career within it.83 Martin:

For Sanders, the theological context is all-important. According to salvation history, God called Abraham and his descendants, gave them the law, established Israel as a kingdom, and punished Israel for disobedience. But God also promised someday to raise his people again, if necessary by defeating their oppressors in war. According to Sanders, the reason all of this is so important is that the authors of the New Testament Gospels present Jesus as early Christians saw him, “as having a major place – in fact the ultimate place – in the context of Jewish salvation history.”84

Sanders point is that the New Testament authors were writing about a figure who they believed had the ultimate place in Jewish salvation history, possibly the Messiah who was to raise the people, defeat the forces of evil, and rebuild the temple. This is precisely why the authors may have been eager to show that Jesus fulfilled biblical prophesies and this may have led them to be inventive. Their inventiveness lay in finding parallels between Jesus and the
characters and prophecies in the Old Testament. Understandably, Sanders does not characterize such inventiveness as dishonesty. Martin:

Sanders says that New Testament authors, in characterizing Jesus as fulfilling biblical statements and prophecies, were inventive, but not dishonest. He thinks that there were some genuine parallels between Jesus and characters and prophecies in Hebrew scripture and that Jesus did what he could to strengthen these parallels, such as riding into Jerusalem on an ass, thus consciously recalling a prophesy in Zechariah. Sanders says that this made it “very easy” for early Christians to invent more parallels, and that there is no doubt that the authors of Matthew, Mark, and Luke did this, citing the birth narratives as prime examples. He says that Matthew structured his birth narrative to portray Jesus as being a second Moses and Luke structured his to portray Jesus as being the promised son of David.85

As an example of an inventive parallel, Sanders offers the birth narrative in Matthew and Luke that claims that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but grew up in Nazareth. According to Jewish salvation history, “the redeemer of Israel was supposed to have been born in Bethlehem, which was David’s city”86. The assumption of lineage to David is amazing but additionally Sanders thinks that Luke achieves the Bethlehem birth through a “fantastic” device. Given that David had lived forty-two generations earlier, Mary’s husband, Joseph, according to Luke (3: 23-38), was still required to register in David’s town! Sanders rightly asks what Augustus, the most rational of the Caesars, could have hoped to achieve, other than chaos, by getting folks to register in the home towns of their remote ancestors.87 There are other serious discrepancies in Matthew and Luke such as the fact that for Matthew Bethlehem was the family home and they moved to Nazareth while for Luke Nazareth was home and they were only visiting Bethlehem. For Sanders, both authors seem to be working a story around the desired fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the actual fact that he was from Nazareth.88 But while Sanders is deeply critical of such inventiveness, as already explained, he feels that the motivation to place Jesus within the context of salvation history is understandable. In a very important sense, the New Testament authors were being true to the spirit of Jesus. Martin:

In a claim that is standardly repeated by conservatives and disputed by liberals, Sanders says that the fact that both John the Baptist at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and Jesus’ followers shortly after its end thought that the climax of history was at hand provides us “with a secure basic conclusion: Jesus thought that God would soon bring about a decisive change in the world.” Sanders says that this conviction on the part of Jesus provides the basic framework of his overall mission. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he concludes, “were right on target” in setting Jesus in the framework of Jewish salvation history. That history, Sanders says, is the lens through which Jesus saw both himself and the world.89

Sanders believes that the coming of the kingdom was at the heart of Jesus’ message and Jesus really believed that God would “dramatically intervene in history by sending the Son of Man”. He thinks that Jesus probably believed that the sending of the Son of Man would be followed by a great judgment and some people would go to heaven and others to Gehanna (hell).90
The next two historians that I consider, and whose research I make use of in the next section, are both Christian believers and in this sense complement Sanders’ naturalism. Sanders’ historical methodology may be immaculate but his leaning towards naturalistic interpretations is questionable. It would seem to be a desirable goal for contemporary academic historians to want to distance themselves not only from Christian apologetics but from theology altogether but Sanders does not succeed in distancing himself from theology because his stance is clearly anti-theological. For example, his view on miracles is that they are either wishful thinking or exaggeration or even on occasion deliberate deception.

My own assumption about such [miracle] stories is that many of the ‘incredible’ ones are based on wishful thinking, others on exaggeration, and only a very few on the conscious wish to deceive.91

Since the denial of theological claims itself involves theological commitments, and Sanders denies Jesus’ miracles and divinity, he fails to distance himself from theology.92 In this respect, John P. Meier gives us a superior model for the contemporary academic historian. Meier believes that in deciding questions of Jesus’ miracles and divinity either way, ‘one ceases to be a historian pure and simple and becomes a part-time theologian’93. It is worthwhile to quote him on the issue of miracles:

- ‘[I]t is not my intention here or elsewhere in this book to make the theological claim that Jesus actually worked miracles. It is sufficient for the historian to know that Jesus performed deeds that many people, both friends and foes, considered miracles.’94
- ‘My major point is that a decision such as ‘God has worked a miracle in this particular healing’ is actually a theological, not a historical, judgment. A historian may examine claims about miracles, reject those for which there are obvious natural explanations, and record instances where the historian can find no natural explanation. Beyond that, a purely historical judgment cannot go.’95
- ‘Just as a historian must reject credulity, so a historian must reject an a priori affirmation that miracles do not or cannot happen. That is, strictly speaking, a philosophical or theological proposition, not a historical one.’96

The last quote rejects Sanders’ ‘a priori affirmation that miracles do not or cannot happen’. Meier seeks a separation of history and theology. Although he wants to use the approach of a secular historian, namely, methodological naturalism in investigating the historical data, he does not allow methodological naturalism to interpret that data. For Meier, it is not the place of a historian to put a theological or anti-theological spin on the data. He admits that the question that motivates his entire study is: Who did Jesus think he was?97 This is purely a historical question and is critically different from the theological or metaphysical question: Who really was Jesus? The former question is one of Jesus’ self-understanding that can be gathered from authentic sayings and deeds. The latter question is of Jesus’ metaphysical status whether divine or human and for Meier this is beyond the ken of historical inquiry. In this way, Meier is able to focus on ‘purely historical sources and arguments’.98 Martin:

Meier insists on the importance of distinguishing among “the real Jesus,” “the historical Jesus,” and “the theological Jesus,”... A way of understanding them... is that
the real Jesus is simply Jesus: whoever he was (or is); the historical Jesus is that same Jesus, subject to this constraint: his only properties are those we are justified in attributing to him on the basis of secular historical research alone; and the theological Jesus is that same Jesus, though now his properties are those we are justified in attributing to him on the basis of historical scholarship supplemented by theology. 99

In the 18th century, Reimarus’ seminal contribution was to distinguish between Jesus in the New Testament and the historical Jesus. But Meier’s model is more advanced than Reimarus’ or even Sanders’ because he essentially observes a method/substance distinction. 100 Reimarus allows his naturalistic method to determine his substantive interpretation of Jesus concluding that 18th century Christian faith ‘could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth’. In other words, the Christian claim that Jesus is a god is not borne out by the real Jesus. But the obvious question is how in the world did Reimarus discover this? The answer is that this is not something that he knows or can prove but it is rather his naturalistic interpretation of history. Thus, naturalism is not merely a method but it is also the basis for his substantive interpretation of the historical data. His substantive thesis goes well beyond anything he can prove on an evidential basis. In a less conspicuous manner but nonetheless, Sanders also allows his methodological naturalism to substantively reject Jesus’ miracles and divinity. But Meier avoids this serious pitfall, distinguishing between his naturalistic method and his substantive interpretation. His method is limited to revealing the historical data because he does not allow it the additional liberty of interpreting that data. He believes that the task of interpretation is not that of a historian. Of course, as a believing Christian he seems to have given the data a theological rather than anti-theological interpretation. However, he does not do so as a historian but rather for more personal reasons.

One of the reasons that Meier ought to be classified as a conservative historian alongside Sanders (but to his right given Sanders’ naturalism) is that they have essentially the same view of the sources. Meier relegates the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas to ‘the historical back burner’ and believes that the sayings in Thomas stem either from the Synoptic Gospels or from second century Christian Gnosticism. For these reasons, he does not use Thomas (or other apocrypha) as an independent source, and like Sanders, focuses ‘almost exclusively on New Testament material or Josephus’. 101 In contrast to this, Crossan is a liberal because he believes that parts of Thomas originated as early as and are independent of the earliest material from the New Testament Gospels. 102 So conservatives rely on the New Testament (and Josephus) and see the apocrypha as 1) originating later than and 2) dependent upon, that material. By contrast, liberals see some of the apocrypha (especially Thomas) as originating as early as, and independent of, New Testament material. For these reasons, they welcome non-canonical material as sources of research and this often results in non-traditional portrayals of Jesus. By contrast, although conservatives also use secular methods they focus mostly on canonical sources and tend to arrive at more traditional results. 103 Another reason that Meier is a conservative like Sanders is that both believe (in keeping with tradition) that the kingdom of God and future eschatology were at the heart of Jesus’ message. Martin:

Contrary to Crossan’s view, but in agreement with Sanders’s, Meier thinks that Jesus never gave up John’s view that God would come in judgment in the near future. Like Sanders, Meier argues that since John the Baptist, immediately prior to Jesus, had a message of future eschatology, and the church, immediately subsequent to Jesus, had
a message of future eschatology, it is very doubtful that Jesus did not himself proclaim future eschatology. Meier adds that this contextual consideration poses “a major problem for the whole approach” of liberals, such as Crossan, who “want to do away with the future eschatology in Jesus’ preaching.”

James D. G. Dunn is also conservative but to the right of Meier because he clearly believes that ‘it is professionally appropriate for a historian to conclude that God intervened in the natural world’105. So obviously, in contrast to Sanders and Crossan, he believes that we should not ‘rule out in advance divine intervention as a possible explanation’106. For example, in comparison to Sanders who finds the New Testament resurrection accounts “confused and confusing” and the problem of their historical reconstruction “intractable”, Dunn offers a far more sympathetic treatment of the resurrection narrative. Similarly, he shares the conservative view that the New Testament material is more reliable than the apocrypha, and he certainly puts more faith in that material than liberal historians, and also seems to give a sympathetic spin to passages that he and the others agree are inventive.108 Dunn is a contemporary academic historian of the order of Sanders and Meier and shares their basic historical methodology. He argues that “the Christ of faith” is a “perversion” of the “historical Jesus”109 and believes that Christian faith does not necessarily have to fog who Jesus was historically and that believers are capable of accepting the real Jesus.

As I have said, the next section will also make considerable use of Dunn’s research and this is a good way to complement Sanders and Meier. However, the essential point is that we must focus on what these conservative historians have in common, namely, a secular historian’s approach or methodological naturalism as far as gathering and analyzing historical data is concerned. As we will see, their naturalistic method results in numerous points of agreement on the historical record of Jesus’ life. And this is their prime value to us, that is, as naturalistic investigators of historical fact. It is a different matter altogether that Sanders interpretation of the data is anti-theological while Meier’s does his best to be a-theological and Dunn allows for a theological interpretation. In the spirit of Meier, we benefit primarily from their purely historical research and less so from their various interpretations. In the manner of any scientific inquiry, scientific historical inquiry also creates wide agreement on the raw historical data although this situation can and does allow for various theories for interpreting that data. Martin suggests that the scientific approach may yet offer a rigorous historical methodology for both secular and faith-based historians. He outlines three steps for such a methodology:

Put simply, it consists in three steps: First, except in certain kinds of circumstances, proceed on the basis of ordinary secular historical methodology, that is, on the basis of methodological naturalism; second, specify which kinds of circumstances are to be considered exceptions; and, third, explain which alternative methodology is going to be followed in these kinds of circumstances. I call the product of following these rules a faith-history.110

Martin’s formula seems quite straightforward and very useful. In the first step, the basic methodology of history is provided, namely, the secular approach that rejects any supernatural intervention in the natural order. A secular historian such as Sanders would apply this method universally without ever moving to the second step of specifying circumstances that are exceptions to the natural order. In contrast, theologically neutral historians such as Meier could specify certain situations in the second step, for example some of Jesus’ miracles,
that could be exceptions to the natural order. However, in the third step Meier may opt not to
give an alternative methodology but simply decide that it is not the historian’s task to offer an
alternative. In contrast to this, Dunn may offer the alternative methodology that the miracles
occur simply by divine fiat. The advantage of this three-layered approach is that it separates
the historical data of step 1 from the alternative methodology of step 3 using the exceptional
cases in step 2 as a buffer. As a result, faith-historians could follow a rigorous methodology
(step 1) while systematically allowing for non-naturalistic explanations (step 2) and even
introducing theological explanations (step 3) without in any way introducing methodological
chaos into the quest for the historical Jesus.111

We already have a sense of John D. Crossan as a liberal historian. One of the main reasons that
he is considered to be liberal is the unusually interdisciplinary nature of his work that makes
use of a wide variety of sources. Three sources of information and evidence that he outlines
explicitly are 1) cross-cultural and cross-temporal anthropology 2) Greco Roman and Jewish
history and 3) literature. Anthropology refers to ‘whatever scholars have learned about
imperial and colonial conflict, elites and peasants, politics and family, taxes and debts, class
and gender, trance, possession, healing, magic, exorcism, and so on in ancient Mediterranean
culture’112. History refers primarily to ‘the work of the Jewish historian Josephus (ca. 37-100
C.E.)’ while literature is ancient texts including the New Testament. In a recent work, he
mentions Galilean archaeology as a fourth source of evidence.113 He ‘stresses that these
sources of evidence do not stand alone but must work together to form an effective
synthesis’.114 If a conservative such as Sanders finds the New Testament material “inventive”
and “confusing” and another conservative such as Meier is also aware of the fragile and
vulnerable condition of the sources, it is expected that a liberal such as Crossan would come
across as comparatively harsh and he does claim that authors of the New Testament Gospels
were “unnervingly free” when it came to ‘omission, addition, change, and correction’115.

Like Sanders, Crossan also mentions the differences between the Gospel birth narratives and
this supports his view that the New Testament authors exercised considerable freedom in
restructuring the scripture. Crossan explains that Luke needs to get Mary and Joseph from
their home in Nazareth to Jesus’ birthplace in Bethlehem (because according to the Old
Testament Bethlehem was prophesied to be the birthplace of the Jewish Messiah). He does so
in Luke 2: 1-7 claiming that they went to Bethlehem in response to Augustus’ census call. The
problem is that the census Luke refers to took place decades before Jesus’ birth.116 In a parallel
to Sanders comment that Luke’s device for moving Mary and Joseph to and from Bethlehem is
‘fantastic’, Crossan comments that Luke’s story is “pure fiction”117. Wright also mentions how
Crossan thinks that ‘Mark (and, following him, Matthew and Luke) have bequeathed to
subsequent history an account of Jesus which, though beguilingly attractive, is fundamentally
fictitious”118. In the same vein, as mentioned above in the discussion on Strauss, with regard to
Jesus’ status as Son of God, Crossan comments that Luke may have preferred mythology to
history.

Crossan characterizes Jesus as a “Cynic sage”. The Greek Cynics (c. 400 – 320 B.C) were
‘famous for negating distinctions of rank and privilege and for flouting social conventions’119.
Jesus ‘was not an intellectual...probably illiterate...and did not have scribal skills or
awareness”120. Crossan believes that Jesus’ motivations are social and economic and that his
message was of ‘equality’ and his mission was to ‘destroy distinctions of rank and privilege’121.
This is different from Sanders, Meier, and Dunn who believe that the heart of the message is the kingdom of God and future eschatology. Crossan believes that while Jesus may have initially accepted John’s eschatological message, he probably underwent a conversion to Cynic philosophy. Again, in contrast to Sanders, Meier and Dunn, he categorizes Jesus as a “magician”. He thinks that Jesus did not cure illness but rather healed illness, differentiating between ‘doctors who “cure disease” - the organic, physical ailment - and others who “heal illness”’---the disease’s effect on patient, family, and community.122

As far as bringing the dead to life Crossan says, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.”123 He distinguishes between the historical passion – the actual account of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, death, and burial – and the prophetic passion – the search by scribally learned followers of Jesus to find a basis or justification in the Hebrew Scriptures for Jesus’ shocking fate... He concludes that what we have now in those detailed New Testament passion accounts “is not history remembered but prophecy historicized,” that is, an after-the-fact fictional account of Jesus’ passion specifically constructed so that the elements in the story fulfilled prophesies from the Hebrew Scriptures.124 So Crossan believes that much of the N.T contains false material that was made up in an attempt to justify Jesus’ end.

Lastly, Luke Timothy Johnson is considered in this survey not only to secure the traditional end of our spectrum but also as a representative of a kind of historical methodology that ought to be rejected. Johnson admires the secular approach of some historians especially the work of John Meier commenting that it is “carried out with the utmost sobriety and seriousness” and “is as solid and moderate and pious” as a secular history of Jesus is ever likely to be.125 But Johnson is highly critical of Meier and other secular historians for using secular rationality to dismantle the ‘narrative structures of the canonical Gospels’.126 He feels that the secular historians have a primarily destructive role and lack the resources to be constructive. They reduce ‘a beautiful, deeply meaningful structure – the New Testament Gospel narratives – to a pile of useless, ugly rubble’127 without having the wherewithal to replace it with anything of comparable beauty and meaning. All the while, Johnson concedes that Meier ‘identifies those pieces of the Gospel narratives that our best evidence suggests reach back to Jesus himself, or to traditions very close to Jesus’.128 But his main complaint is that although the destructive project is on good scientific grounds, once it has run its course it leaves in its wake insufficient evidence for the constructive project of an alternative portrait for Jesus.129 To some extent, Johnson is right because as far as reconstructive or positive accounts of Jesus are concerned the secular historians have to go well beyond their evidence, and their accounts are based on ‘their best educated guesses’ rather than ‘their secure, evidently grounded conclusions’.130 Johnson asks what point there is in destroying ‘a beautiful, deeply meaningful structure’ on strictly evidential grounds when the structures replacing it are also on shaky evidential ground. However, the question does not seem to have much merit because Meier’s reconstruction of Jesus as a ‘marginally Jewish, (perhaps) miracle-working, eschatological prophet’131 is by any standard a meaningful portrait and has the immeasurable advantage of being in harmony with the historical data. The same is true of the reconstructions of other historians who use the secular approach including Sanders and Dunn.

Johnson’s criticism fails because at critical points in the Jesus story the traditional Christian view is in deep tension with secular histories. Meier’s reconstruction of Jesus is far superior to
the traditional account precisely because of its harmony with historical data gathered through the secular approach of methodological naturalism. There is a conflict here of traditional faith (Johnson) with historical scholarship (Meier). But this is not a conflict of faith and reason. This is because the traditional faith of Johnson is not merely in confrontation with the historical scholarship of Meier. It is also in conflict with the faith of Meier (and Dunn) that is in harmony with historical scholarship. So the real conflict is between tradition-bound faith (Johnson) and rational faith (Meier/Dunn). It is a conflict between tradition and reason because there is faith on both sides of the divide. In this conflict, tradition is not merely in a confrontation with historical scholarship, it is in conflict with ‘scholarship, science, philosophy, or just plain thinking’. And, of course, we’ve seen this before because it is precisely the central theme of this thesis. True, the thesis is on Islamic hermeneutics but it is relevantly about the confrontation of tradition-bound literalism with rational literalism. As was the case with Christian faith, literalism is on both sides of the divide and so the conflict is between tradition and reason. It is not literalism per se that is the problem but rather a tradition-bound literalism that is blind to sufficient reasons in its environment - reasons that indicate that on certain occasions we must abandon literalism and go with a non-literal reading. In contrast, a literalism that is sensitive to such reasons is a rational literalism because it adopts the non-literal understanding when there is sufficient reason to do so. In the same way, it is a tradition-bound Christian faith that is the problem because it is blind to sufficient reasons that work against some aspects of the tradition. Obviously, there can be no problem with a rational faith that is sensitive to sufficient reasons and adapts accordingly. Johnson has sufficient reason to accept Meier’s portrayal of Jesus simply because it is in deeper harmony with historical evidence (this being a sufficient reason for such acceptance). But it has to be his tradition-bound faith (as opposed to a rational one) that makes this move difficult for him.

In response to such profound criticism, Johnson may be willing to bite the bullet and abandon secular histories altogether, in the sense of denying any relevance whatsoever of such histories to the faith. Thus, Meier and Dunn do not have a rational faith but rather a misguided faith because they have allowed their faith to be influenced by secular history. Martin:

[Johnson] concedes that for secular historians and their students “it is obviously important to study Christian origins historically” and that “in such historical inquiry faith commitments should play no role.” His point, rather, is that this secular project has virtually nothing to do with what Christians should believe. One of his reasons, as we have seen, is that the evidence is too slender and ambiguous “to enable a truly comprehensive reconstruction of Christian origins.” Another is that secular accounts – merely because they are secular, and regardless of how well they might be done on their own terms – do not proceed from the perspective of faith.”

So while secular historians are free to investigate Jesus all they want, all their work is irrelevant to Christian belief because their histories are not traditional faith-histories or are not discovered from a traditional faith-based perspective. Of course, the problem with all this is that it is precisely the traditional faith-histories that the secular histories have set out to challenge. In order not to beg any questions, Johnson needs to give us an independent method to judge between secular histories and traditional faith-histories. The secular historians have already given us a method, namely that secular histories are more rational because more
evidence-based and when this is added to the universally accepted assumption that rational and evidential is superior to traditional their work is done. Is Johnson going to question the assumption and say that traditional is better than rational and evidential? No, but he attempts something equally mind-boggling. Martin:

Johnson says that “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus.” He concedes that Christians “assert continuity” between the historical Jesus and the living Lord Jesus, but insists that “their faith is confirmed” not by evidence regarding the past but by “the reality of Christ’s power in the present.”

Johnson’s view is that it is our present experiences that give us faith in the power of Christ and determine our view of ‘evidence regarding the past’. It is not historical evidence that constrains our views about the past but rather our present experiences (of Christ’s power). This is obviously not good historical method. How can our present experience of things be the primary determinant of a truth about the past? Anything at all may have happened in the past and if I primarily rely on my present experiences then I may never learn the truth about the past. For example, if I rely on my present experience of my parents’ love for me then in what way will this shed any light on the possible fact that they adopted me when I was a few weeks old? If I were to discover the adoption papers in a secret safe someday, it will not change their love for me and may not change my love for them but it will certainly set the record straight and change my perspective on things. The point is how can my present experience of their love set the record straight in any way? In order to do that do I not simply need to have some ordinary historical evidence such as is provided by adoption papers? Using an analogy offered by Johnson, Martin makes the same point:

Johnson uses an analogy to try to explain what he means. He says, “The situation with the Christians’ memory of Jesus is not like that of a long-ago lover who died and whose short time with us is treasured,” but, “like that of a lover who continues to live with the beloved in a growing and maturing relationship.” Then, drawing on his own personal experience, he says that even though he experiences the love shown him by his wife as continuous with the love that she showed him in the early years of their relationship, “in no way do I find that love dependent on the right interpretation of those earlier experiences.” But unless Johnson is an extremely unusual person, I doubt that he means what he says...

Martin explains his last comment with the hypothetical case of a man who is in a loving relationship with his wife, but after 20 years of marriage discovers an envelope in the attic that has love letters between his wife and another man bearing postmarks for the first 10 years of the marriage. This discovery will surely change the man’s interpretation of his ‘earlier experiences’ with his wife whom he had always believed to be wholly faithful to him. He will now be far closer to the ‘right interpretation of those earlier experiences’ and this will surely change the way he receives the present love of his wife. Martin poignantly asks the reader how they would feel if they had discovered that envelope:

Would your discovery affect your feelings toward your wife or would you simply disregard your discovery as an irrelevant part of the dead past, not as a “vibrant part of the living present”? If you are a normal human being with normal emotions, of course your discovery would affect your feelings. It would matter deeply. The “love”
shown to you now by your wife would not only be experienced by you as continuous with the love she showed you in the earlier years of your marriage, but in many ways how you experienced her love in the present would be deeply “dependent on the right interpretation of those earlier experiences”. The moral of this alternative model of Johnson’s own example is that contrary to what he has suggested, to virtually everyone, probably even including Johnson, history matters. And the history that matters is not history constructed entirely independently of ordinary historical evidence, but history determined largely, if not solely, on the basis of ordinary historical evidence. In the case of our example, this evidence would include the letters. To suggest, as Johnson does, that history determined by ordinary means does not in general matter is to reveal that in this respect one’s theories are out of touch with the actual bases of one’s emotional life, or at least most people’s emotional lives.136

Martin’s point is that it is unnatural and difficult if not impossible to compartmentalize history and psychology so that secular histories have no effect on religious psychology:

In my view, most of us are too psychologically holistic to segregate and insulate our experiences in the present from our interpretations of the past, and also too holistic to segregate our interpretations of the past from evidence that we are aware of concerning what happened. In other words, what I am suggesting is that even if we wanted to compartmentalize our psyches and our lives so as to keep experiences, interpretations, and evidence completely insulated from each other, most of us are too holistic to succeed in doing it. Just as in the case of the wife example, what most of us think about one important part of our lives and how we experience that part both affects and is affected by what we think about other important parts of our lives and how we experience them – especially parts as big and significant as “the past” and “the present.” And what most of us think about “the past” both affects and is affected by whatever evidence we are aware of concerning what actually happened.137

The point that it is difficult to see how Christians can insulate their feelings for Christ from their evidence on the historical figure of Jesus reverberates at a deeper level with the aims of this thesis, namely, to show that it is difficult to see how Christians can insulate their belief in the Trinity from the deep psychology of logic and simplicity. As Martin has explained, we cannot ‘compartmentalize our psyches’ even if we wanted to and so it is going to be difficult to maintain a belief in the Trinity when deep features of our psychology simply want to tear it down. Our aim in the next section is to show that the historical evidence does not support the claim that God intervenes on behalf of the Trinity or that Jesus has divine status, certainly not to the point of obstructing the path of the internal demolition crew of logic and simplicity to the Trinity. The table below is a useful summary of the contents of our survey in this section.
3. The Psychosocial Origins of Christianity

Scholars do not dispute the following historical facts. Jesus was born into a Jewish household and lived his life as a deeply spiritual Jew without declaring that he wanted to introduce or embrace any faith other than Judaism. As a child, Jesus regularly attended the synagogue and learned the Jewish prayers. The Gospel traditions of Jesus attending the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2.41-51; John 5.1; 7.10) show his positive attitude to this pillar of the Jewish religion and Luke in fact goes out of his way to begin and end his Gospel in the Temple (Luke 1.5-23; 24.52) thereby emphasizing its importance in Jesus’ life. In other words, Jesus had a fairly regular Jewish upbringing and life, and his mission was also centered on Jewish ideology, norms and practices. As Sanders points out, Jesus ‘went from town to town, village to village, usually preaching in synagogues on the sabbath… Jesus obviously believed that Isaiah and the other prophets were truly prophets of God, since he quoted them with approval (for example, Matt. – 11.2-6)’ and it is an ‘indisputable fact that Jesus thought that the Jewish scripture contained the revealed word of God, and that Moses had issued commandments that should be followed’\textsuperscript{138}. As Dunn further explains:

Jesus is also presented as a good, devout Jew in other relevant ways. There is the tradition of him attending the synagogue ‘as his custom was’ (Luke 4.16). There is also a strong implication in Mark 1.44 and Luke 17.14 of Jesus’ readiness to work within the current religious and social system (he sends the cleansed lepers to show themselves to the priest and to ‘offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded’). Striking also is the degree to which the prayer which he taught his disciples as their prayer was so closely modeled on Jewish prayers of the time... \textsuperscript{139}
Inter-factionalism

There is overwhelming evidence for the view that Jesus was, in the least, a Jewish reformer. He lived at a time when there was a need for a synthesis that would subdue Jewish factionalism and sectarianism. Reviewing the literature of the period, Dunn writes:

This range of literature just reviewed includes most of the main writings which have come down to us from Jewish groups in Palestine in the 150-200 years before Jesus. They also stretch across that period. And, most strikingly, they all bear the stamp of factional dispute. Indeed, this period in Judaism seems to have been riven with factional dispute. We do not have evidence from any other period of ancient Judaism where the picture is so clear. Evidently within the Judaism of Jesus’ day there were various groups who regarded themselves as alone loyal to the covenant and the law, and who regarded and denounced their fellow Jews as being disloyal. And key and characteristic terms in the several polemics were ‘righteous’ and ‘sinner’.¹⁴⁰

Writers would see themselves as ‘righteous’ because in their self-perception they faithfully followed the covenant and the law (essentially they were self-righteous). The antithesis of ‘righteous’ was ‘sinners’ but these were not only non-Jewish others. Importantly, they were the other Jewish factions that did things differently from the ‘righteous’.¹⁴¹ In other words, ‘the righteous’ were Jews who condemned other Jews as ‘sinners’. Jews could be condemned by other Jews for having a different view of the calendar (e.g. failing to properly compute the day of a festival), of ritual purity, and of legitimate priesthood (these being a feature of the literature reviewed by Dunn).¹⁴² Jews could be condemned for being ‘godless men, who represent themselves as being righteous’ or because they ‘touch unclean things’ with ‘hand and mind’.¹⁴³ In other words, it appears that it was not all that difficult to secure a condemnation.

I will follow Dunn in highlighting this as a point of social psychology.¹⁴⁴ There are two issues involved: 1) conflict between groups that are similar or close to each other are likely to be more intense (as in sibling rivalry where sharing a common background can make the struggle for an independent identity more intense) and 2) there are boundary markers that serve to differentiate one group from another. The Jewish factions shared a common tradition and so in creating an independent identity each faction was driven to highlight what may now seem to us minor differences between them. These differences became the boundary markers that differentiated groups from each other and were the basis of the fiercely defended identity of each group. Of course, all of this intra-Jewish differentiation was loaded with religious significance. The Jewish people had a covenant with God to keep his law and each faction saw itself as the true keeper of the covenant.¹⁴⁵ So the whole situation was emotionally quite charged. Dunn:

The language could be so fierce because the distinguishing issue was seen quite simply as a matter of life and death: personal and group identity was at stake; salvation was at stake; the meaning and character of God’s covenant with Israel was at stake. And these different interpretations, which might seem minor to the onlooker but as expressing fundamental differences by the factions themselves, had to be defended at all costs by those who represented the groups. All this is implicit in the word ‘sinner’ as a term of inter-factional polemic. At the time of Jesus to call a fellow Jew a ‘sinner’ was both to condemn that person as effectively outside the covenant and to defend one’s
own identity and boundaries, the group’s interpretation of what walking within the covenant meant.\textsuperscript{146}

This was the psychosocial environment in which Jesus began a mission of reforming Judaism (of course I do not mean to deny that his mission was more than a mere reform movement). The Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes numbered among the Jewish factions in Galilee and Judea (the geographical setting for the mission) and the Pharisees in particular play a prominent negative role in the Gospels. While the Jews were ‘set apart’ from the rest of humankind because of their election by God, the Pharisees probably saw themselves as ‘set apart’ from the rest of the Jews.\textsuperscript{147} It is generally agreed that their name (‘Pharisees’) probably meant ‘separated ones’.\textsuperscript{148} In any event, their historical record does reveal a determination to be the ‘set apart’ of God, especially through their strict understanding of the purity laws that reflected their belief that the uncleanness of the Gentiles also adhered to the majority of their Jewish brethren.\textsuperscript{149} While I could discuss the differences Jesus had with the Pharisees on more than one issue (including, for example, the Sabbath), it will be sufficient for my purposes to explain their differences on one of the major and central issues of contention, namely, ritual purity. In any case, the Pharisees of Jesus’ time are believed to have been a purity sect with a high level of concern to maintain the purity of both the Temple and the cult outside it.\textsuperscript{150}

One of the many issues that capture the spirit of Jesus’ general response to Pharisaic ritualism is the ceremonial hand washing before meals. On one occasion (Mark 7: 1-23), the Pharisees see Jesus’ disciples eating food without (ceremonially) washing their hands.

Mark 7: 5-9
So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!”

This interaction is characteristic of the three synoptic Gospels (Mark, Mathew, Luke). I will say a word later about why the Gospel of John can only be a secondary source for the historical Jesus. For the time being, some things should be noted about an interaction such as this. First, the issue at hand is one of the boundary markers of Pharisaic identity. Second, the Pharisees assume that Jesus is a Jewish teacher and can be questioned within the Jewish tradition. They never insinuate that Jesus may not be a Jewish teacher or that his disciples should not follow him in his Jewish teachings. Third, Jesus also gives no hint that he is not Jewish or that he does not believe in the Jewish prophets. \textit{Au contraire}, he quotes Isaiah and he responds to the challenge to his interpretation of Jewish law by hurling the charge of hypocrisy against God’s laws sent through the Jewish prophets. In his response to the Pharisees, Jesus claims an absolute right to interpret the tradition that he shares with them. So if anything at all, this is an
inter-factional exchange. The incident ends with Jesus privately explaining to his disciples that it is not what goes into the stomach, namely, this or that food (or, for that matter, manner of eating) that makes a man unclean but rather what comes out of the heart, namely, the thoughts and actions of a man (evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, etc.) that make him unclean. In other words, it is inward purity that really matters.\textsuperscript{151} These views are characteristic of Jesus in the Gospels and show his intention to challenge ‘a factional attitude to, and expression of, the law’\textsuperscript{152}.

The Temple in Jerusalem had an innermost sanctuary ‘protected by what in effect was a sequence of concentric circles to ensure maximum protection from defilement\textsuperscript{153}. To have permission to advance through the outer circles towards the innermost sanctuary one had to advance in degrees of purity by being free at every advance of the following imperfections: leprosy, bleeding, corpse defilement, physical blemish and unloosed hair, unwashed hands and feet\textsuperscript{154}. Only a physically unblemished ritually pure high priest could enter the innermost sanctuary. Ritual purity was a matter of wide concern in the Judaism of Jesus’ time and it applied to a wide range of activities. The Dead Sea Scrolls bear testimony to the strict purity regulations observed by the Qumran covenants (another faction - probably the same as Essenes - that disputed with the Pharisees). The sanctity of the community or assembly had to be preserved even in the common meal table.

No man smitten with any human uncleanliness shall enter the assembly of God... No man smitten in his flesh, or \textit{paralysed in his feet or hands or lame or blind} or deaf or dumb or smitten in his flesh with a \textit{visible blemish}... for the angels of holiness are (with) their (congregation)... let him not enter among (the congregation), for he is smitten (iqSa 2.3-10 Vermes).\textsuperscript{155}

While this is a list of those excluded from the assembly and common meal table its concerns are based on the following passage from Leviticus that describes those debarred from priesthood:

Say to Aaron, None of your descendents throughout their generations who has a \textit{blemish} may approach to offer the bread of God. For no one who has a \textit{blemish} shall draw near, a man \textit{blind}, \textit{or lame}... or a man who has an \textit{injured foot} or an \textit{injured hand}... (Lev. 21.17-21)\textsuperscript{156}

The Qumran covenants were simply applying such specific Temple regulations in a more universal way to the conduct of daily life. Jesus was clearly against their strict, cumbersome and misguided application of the purity regulations. He was even against the way in which priests (let alone ordinary Jews) observed their ritual purity. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 30-7), Jesus was profoundly critical of the priest who did not come to the aid of the injured man out of a concern for ritual purity. Jesus wanted his disciples to be like the Samaritan who came to the aid of his fellow man and was truly a neighbor to his fellow man. As for the meal table, Jesus’ words (Luke 14: 13, 21) echo the Qumran regulations in a striking way.

He said also to the man who had invited him, ‘When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast invite the poor,
As Dunn observes, Jesus includes the very people that the Qumran covenanters exclude, namely, the maimed, lame, and blind. Thus he had to be aware of the parallel, of the background ritual that he was challenging. In doing so he was challenging the boundaries being drawn by major factions within Second Temple Judaism (ca. 515 B.C. – 70 A.D.). These boundaries were being drawn within the people of Israel and because Jesus saw his mission as restoring the wholeness of Israel, these were boundaries that he had to challenge.

The picture of Jesus as reformer rather than apostate is incontrovertible. The fount of his motivation is the deepest message of the Old Testament. When asked what the greatest commandments were he said (Matt. 22: 37-40):

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets

Jesus’ first quote is from Deuteronomy 6: 4f., and his second quote is from Leviticus 19: 18. The Jews of his day would have recognized these Torah commandments as summarizing the two ‘tables’ of Jewish law. Like most other reformers, Jesus is drawing strength from first principles in order to loosen the stranglehold of later ritualistic accretions. Regarding the Temple sacrifice, Jesus said (Matt. 5: 23-4):

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled with your brother; then come and offer your gift

Again, observe that Jesus is not against the sacrificial ritual. Rather, he is calling for an intensification of meaningful observance of the law. His intention is to ‘reveal the true meaning of the law and demonstrate it in action’. He says (Matt. 5: 17-20):

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices or teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Law that Jesus is referring to is pure divine law uncontaminated by transmission and interpretation. Jesus’ esteem for this Law is made quite plain in the passage and note the implications of the last sentence for his factional opponents, namely, that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are not quite making the cut (to get to heaven). But how authentic is
the material of the three synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke) that essentially gives us the picture of Jesus outlined above? The Synoptics are in deep conflict on critical issues with other material in the New Testament, particularly the letters of Paul and the Gospel of John. In comparison to the latter authors, the Synoptic authors are widely believed to give us a more authentic portrayal of the historical Jesus, but there are points at which one feels that none of the material in the New Testament truly captures the events of his life.

**Synoptics vs. Paul**

We can usefully focus on two critical issues on which the Synoptic accounts differ markedly from Paul. The first is Jesus’ status as the Messiah or Christ. The second is the account of his resurrection. The glaring differences between the Synoptics and Paul – both among the earliest and most credible authorities on Jesus - exposes the highly controversial nature of the Christian tradition, and it is precisely for this reason that such a tradition cannot supply a sufficient reason to block the application of logic and simplicity against the Trinity. There simply exists no clear divine instruction in favor of the Trinity that will put the inner demons of logic and simplicity to rest.

The Messiah
The word Messiah, comes from the Hebrew root *Mem-Shin-Chet* which means to rub with oil, smear, or anoint163 and Messiah means the anointed one (as one anointed with oil such as a king e.g. Psalms 89: 20 “I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him [me-shach-tiv]”). The Second Temple Judaism of Jesus’ time seems to have had the following beliefs about the Messiah (Christos in Greek) that were based on readings of Old Testament prophecies164:

1) The Messiah will be *royal* because he will be the true *king* of Israel
2) He will be a great political ruler descended in the line of David (Jeremiah 23: 5; Ezekiel 37: 22, 24; Micah 5: 2, 5-7; Psalms 2: 8-12)
3) He will gather the exiles of Israel to the land of their forefathers (Isaiah 11: 11-2; Jeremiah 23:8, 30:3; Ezekiel 37: 21-2, 25)
4) He will build the Holy Temple (2 Samuel 7: 13; Jeremiah 33: 18)
5) The Messiah will successfully lead Israel ‘in its great and ultimate battle against the forces of evil and paganism’165 (Isaiah 11: 13-4; Micah 5: 5-15; Psalms 2:9-12, 110:6)
6) He will rule as king over a restored Israel in an age of universal belief and peace (Isaiah 2: 1-4, 11: 1-9)
7) The Messiah will act as the representative of Israel, like David who represented Israel in the fight against Goliath (Micah 5: 4-6)

From a purely historical point of view, Jesus does not seem to have fulfilled any of these prophecies. There are other prophecies that he did fulfill (examples: riding into Jerusalem on an ass, being God’s representative to Israel) but I am not focusing on those at present. Even according to the Synoptics, Jesus did not fulfill many crucial messianic prophecies during his lifetime. He neither exercised regal/political authority (1 & 2) nor gathered exiled Jews to Jerusalem or the province of Judea (3) because he lived at a time when the Jews were not in exile. He did not build a Temple (4) as it was already standing, and he did not engage in any military confrontation (5), and nor did he reign over an age of universal peace and belief in
God (6). He did not represent the Israelites (7) who continued to be represented by the traditional priesthood. The fact that Jesus did not fulfill these messianic prophecies is an important reason for the Christian belief in the Second Coming when Jesus is expected to fulfill the remaining prophecies.

Based on the Old and New Testaments, the case for Jesus being the long-awaited Jewish Messiah is very strong as long as we allow that he will return to fulfill the remaining prophecies. There is no reason not to allow this, because the matter is one that is determined by God, and there is no reason to think that God will not send Jesus back to Earth. Although I have no idea why God would plan things this way, since we are talking about God an equally valid question is: why not? As I have fleetingly observed, Jesus did fulfill some critical prophecies and so it is interesting to look at who the Synoptic authors believed Jesus was.

For Matthew, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in Micah 5: 2, 4 of the Messiah who will be born in Bethlehem and shepherd Israel:

Matthew 2: 1-6
1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi [wise men] from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written [Micah 5: 2, 4]:

6 “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

For Matthew, Jesus had a high status even among God’s chosen ones and in the following verses it is clear that his status is greater than that of John the Baptist:

Matthew 3: 13-5
13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

15 Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”
In Matthew, it is clear that John the Baptist is expecting ‘the one who is to come’ and also clear from Jesus’ response that he is the one (also see Mark 1: 1-10 where John prophesies the one to come after him)

Matthew 11: 1-10
1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 1 to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

4 Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

7 As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written [Malachi 3: 1]:

“‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' (Italics added)

The correspondence between John the Baptist and Jesus is one of deep significance because it is between prophets, and so whatever they convey to each other is critical. Jesus would never mislead the Baptist, and so his answer above (Matt. 11: 4-6&10) to the latter’s question is essentially an admittance of his status as ‘the one who is to come’. If Jesus did not outright declare his status as the Messiah it is simply because he was not speaking to John directly but through intermediaries. Jesus understands the sensitivity of his status as Messiah (as does John, who sends an encrypted question regarding ‘the one who is to come’) and he is absolutely right about this because it is precisely the charge (Messiah: King of the Jews) for which he is eventually sent for execution.

There is considerable evidence that the people were waiting for the Jewish Messiah and in Luke (3: 15-6) John the Baptist denies that he is the Messiah saying that the one to come after him is greater:

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Jesus was in the habit of keeping people quiet about his real status and he even orders an exorcised demon not to speak of it (Mark 1: 23-5). In the same way, he orders the healed leper not to speak of his miracle (Mark 1: 40-5). So it comes as no surprise that he does not want Peter to broadcast the view that he is the Messiah (Mark 8: 27-30):
Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, “Who do people say I am?” 28 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah.” 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Even though Jesus does not openly claim that he is the Messiah, the sense of all these Synoptic verses is very clear in that he actually is the Messiah but does not want to broadcast that fact precisely because he will be arrested and killed. Matthew has another version of the above incident except that in this version Jesus congratulates Peter on profound insight into Jesus’ status:

Matthew 16: 13-7&20
13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” 14 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

17 Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” … 20 Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Why is Mark’s account of this incident different from Matthew’s? There are two possible explanations. First, Matthew was written later than Mark and some material was added in the interim, for example, the expression ‘the Son of the living God’ in Matt. 16: 16 seems to be a Christological addition because such an important phrase would not have been missed by the author of Mark. Similarly, the congratulation to Peter (Matt. 16: 17) is a Christological addition to show Jesus’ acceptance of his Messiah status. The second possibility is that although Matthew’s account was later, Mark missed some important details in his account such as Jesus congratulating Peter for his insight. In this case, it would seem that Mark went directly from Peter’s response to Jesus’ directive not to tell anyone of his Messiah status thus missing the word of congratulation to Peter for his insight.

Either ways, one may conclude from all this that according to the Synoptics, Jesus was indeed the Messiah but did not want that fact broadcast all over Galilee and Judea. The Synoptic view must also be that there are many messianic prophecies that Jesus will fulfill when he returns (as he did not fulfill them in his first mission). Paul also believes the Jesus is the Messiah but in his epistles that concept takes on a profoundly different significance. Either Paul had access to information that the Synoptic authors did not, or Paul or his informants were profoundly creative with the raw material supplied by the actual events of Jesus’ life.

Paul believed that Jesus is the Messiah referred to in messianic proof-texts from the Old Testament such as Psalms 2 and 110, and 2 Samuel 7, and also less obvious texts such as Psalms 8, 72, and 89. But Paul’s Messiah is not the Messiah of the Synoptics. The Messiah in
Paul dies for all our sins thus washing away the sins of all who accept him. This novel theology is not found in the Synoptics. Paul writes (Romans 11: 26-7):

26 As it is written:
“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
27 And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

In referring to what is written in the Old Testament, Paul attempts to ground his new theology in texts such as Isaiah 59:20, 21; 27:9; and Jeremiah 31: 33, 34. The texts most supportive of Paul’s innovation are Isaiah 27: 9 and Jer. 31: 34 but even these cannot bear the weight of Paul’s new theology. Both Isaiah 27: 9 and Jeremiah 31: 34 are set within the context of a description of the messianic age:

Isaiah 27: 9
9 By this, then, will Jacob’s guilt be atoned for,
and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin:
When he makes all the altar stones
to be like limestone crushed to pieces,
no Asherah poles or incense altars
will be left standing.

Isaiah 27 describes a messianic age when God will punish His enemies and restore some remnant of Israel. The atonement of Jacob’s guilt and the removal of his sin must be understood in that context. There is no mention of the Messiah dying for our sins.

Jeremiah 31: 29-30, 34
29 “In those days people will no longer say,
‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

30 Instead, everyone will die for their own sin; whoever eats sour grapes—their own teeth will be set on edge...

34 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD.
“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Italics added)

Jeremiah 31 also describes a messianic age in which a remnant of Israel will be restored and Jacob will be delivered ‘from the hand of those stronger than they’. Verses 29 and 30 are crystal clear on the point that each person must bear their own sin and so it is difficult to argue that verse 34 is an allusion to the Messiah dying for our sins. All that is said in the verse is that
God ‘will remember their sins no more’ but that is surely because they will have atoned for their sins. The assumption that God will forget their sins because of the Messiah is baseless.

But this raises the question as to why Paul or his informants need the Messiah to die for our sins? The answer has to do with the fact that the Messiah not only vanquishes sin but also death. Paul:

1 Corinthians 15: 3-4
  3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures

Paul asserts that Christ was raised from the dead ‘according to the Scriptures’ but he fails to back this assertion with a citation from the Old Testament as is his usual practice. Geza Vermes notes:

... the absence of an actual Biblical quotation in favour of the resurrection of the Messiah suggests that there existed no established tradition among Jews about a dying and risen Christ.166

Because Jesus never engaged in a military confrontation with the Romans or the Jewish priesthood the Synoptics never claimed that he fulfilled the messianic prophecies related to vanquishing the forces of paganism and evil. But Paul is profoundly creative in this regard because he claims that Jesus overcame sin and death (dies for all sins and then rises from death) and this was his victory over paganism and evil.167 Paul:

Colossians 2: 13-5
  13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Italics added)

Paul believes that the burden of all our sins was nailed to the cross with the sacrifice of the Messiah. Moreover, a ‘public spectacle’ was made of ‘the powers and authorities’ and so they too were vanquished with a slap on their face. Jesus triumphed over them ‘by the cross.’ But not only this, death itself was destroyed by his resurrection and will be destroyed by the resurrection of the believers. Paul:

1 Corinthians 15: 24-6
  24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

1 Corinthians 15: 54
  54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” (Italics added)
Romans 6: 9
9 For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. 10 The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. (Italics added)

In comparison to the Synoptics, Paul has taken a radically innovative view on the enemies of the Messiah. In addition to the kings of the Earth (as the Old Testament has it) the enemies of the Messiah are sin and death. The Synoptics naturally shy away from the bald assertion that Jesus overcame earthly powers and authorities. But Paul believes the Jesus defeated them by the cross, and he then defeated sin by his sacrifice, and then, ultimately, three days later, he defeated death through his resurrection. So Paul’s Messiah defeats the earthly powers, and then sin and death and in this way fulfills (and continues to fulfill) the messianic prophecies.

Paul’s theology is that everyone who believes in Christ was crucified with him and set free of sin because death liberates us from sin. Moreover, just as Christ overcame death through his resurrection, the believers were also given a new life (one that is victorious over sin). Paul:

Romans 6: 2-8 (see also Romans 8: 1-2)
2 We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

In this way, Jesus has fulfilled the messianic prophecy of leading Israel to victory over its enemies, namely, sin and death. The theory that the messianic battle was redefined by Paul is introduced by N. T. Wright:

The messianic battle has been redefined, not abandoned, and indeed it has been placed centrally within one of Paul’s greatest arguments... God’s plan for Israel and the world had come to its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel’s Messiah and the world’s true Lord, in whom Israel’s destiny had been accomplished and in whom, therefore, Jew and Gentile alike could inherit the promises made to Abraham.¹⁶⁸

In opening the path of salvation for the Gentiles, Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecy that the nations will rally to him (e.g. Isaiah 11: 10, 12). But for Jews and Gentiles to inherit the promises made to Abraham they must believe in Jesus and actually be in him, “so that what is true of him is true of them”¹⁶⁹. One of Paul’s most theologically creative ideas is that the Church and the believers are the Temple of God and the body of Christ. Paul:
1 Corinthians 3: 16-7
16 Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

1 Corinthians 6: 15
Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?

2 Corinthians 6: 16
16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God (Italics added)

And so in this sense, Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecy of rebuilding the Temple. Those who follow him are the new Temple! Moreover, they constitute the body of the Messiah! As supernatural characteristics merge in Paul’s radically innovative view of the Messiah, the portrait reaches its climax in the final enthroning of the Messiah as the Son of God. Wright:

[N]ote the final and critical point in Paul’s view of Jesus as the Messiah. At certain key moments (which, though not frequent, are always, when they come, central and emphatic), Paul refers to Jesus as God’s son... with Paul we begin to see that usage of ‘son of God’ which grows and swells within early Christianity until it has drowned out the messianic meaning almost entirely. ‘When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son’; ‘what the Torah could not do, God has done, sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh’; ‘if God did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not with him give us all things?’ [Gal. 4: 4; Rom. 8: 3, 32] Paul here draws on the language of Wisdom and Torah, Gods gifts to his people, but translates them into the messianic terms of divine sonship, thereby creating a puzzling theological proposal for which only the later language of the Trinity would be adequate. And he thereby also completes the set of messianic themes which we noted in Judaism, albeit in a way which took a decisive step beyond anything we know from his contemporaries. The royal Messiah... had fought and won the ultimate battle, had built the new temple, had brought Israel’s history to its long-prophesied climax, and had done so... as God’s representative.¹⁷⁰

The Resurrection
Concerning the resurrection of Jesus, Strauss observed that ‘rarely has an incredible fact been worse attested, and never has a badly attested fact been intrinsically less credible’¹⁷¹. In contrast to this we have Wright who believes that the resurrection was a historical event.¹⁷² The most conspicuous evidence against Wright’s view is that the earliest Gospel (Mark) may originally not even have made a single reference to Jesus’ resurrection appearances. Geza Vermes explains:

The oldest codices of Mark’s Gospel, the Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (fourth century AD), as well as the old Sinaitic Syriac translation (fourth/fifth century), abruptly terminate chapter 16 at verse 8. This is the so-called shorter ending of Mark. The longer ending (Mark 16: 9-19), a later revision of the account... ¹⁷³
This means that the 4th century Markan script allowed for a resurrection but for none of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. From a historian’s point of view, this undermines the credibility of the entire resurrection event because for Matthew, Luke, and Paul this event is intrinsically bound with the appearances, because they are the evidence for it. If Mark had no need to mention something as critical and integral to the event as the very appearances of the risen dead, then there has to be a question as to the original authors’ belief in the event itself. Mark is the earliest Gospel but offers the briefest account by far of the resurrection, and although the event is central to traditional Christian faith it does not seem to be important to the author of Mark. Keep in mind that the oldest codices are from the 4th century, and it is possible that the short resurrection episode in Mark 16: 1-8 was missing three centuries earlier when Mark was written. We must ask ourselves how difficult it could have been to add 8 verses (Mark 16: 1-8) to the official Gospel of Mark in the intervening three centuries given that it is almost certain that the 12 verses that follow them (Mark 16: 9-20) were actually added to that Gospel later (these 12 later verses show the unmistakable imprint of Luke and John174).

Mark 16: 1-8
1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”

4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

6 “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Matthew is the second Gospel to be written and its account of the Resurrection (Matt. 28: 1-20) is twice as long as the ‘shorter ending of Mark’. A critical difference with Mark is the appearances, and Jesus makes an appearance before the two Marys in Matt. 28: 9, and then another appearance before the eleven disciples on a Galilean mountain in Matt. 28: 16-7.

Matthew 28: 9
9 Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

A notable similarity between the accounts of Mark and Matthew is that the resurrection is a physical bodily one because the body is not in the tomb in both accounts and in Matthew the women clasped Jesus’ feet. Luke is the third Gospel to be written and has a considerably longer account than Matthew (Luke 24: 1-53). Luke allows for three separate appearances, first to two disciples, second to Peter, and third to the apostles and disciples together. The
Resurrection is corporeal in Luke as well because the tomb is empty and in his first appearance Jesus physically handles some bread.

Luke 24: 30
30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.

But Luke irrefutably establishes the physicality and corporeality of the resurrection.

Luke 24: 36-43
36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence. (Italics added)

Paul’s account offers a stark contrast to the Synoptics both on account of appearances and on account of bodily resurrection. Paul is unnervingly generous with the appearances, and Jesus appears not only to a disciple and to the apostles but also to five hundred ‘brothers and sisters’ making the resurrection a full-fledged public event that, as a result, should certainly have been transmitted in a more reliable historical fashion than it was. For example, it is not even known at what place and at what time the five hundred saw Jesus. Paul:

1 Corinthians 15: 3-8
3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

But if Jesus appeared to 500 people ‘most of whom are still living’ when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, then why does Paul or anyone else for that matter have no knowledge of where and when this appearance took place? As Vermes notes:

The tradition received by Paul includes features which are absent from the other resurrection accounts of the New Testament. In his detailed list, there are several otherwise unattested apparitions, such as the vision of the risen Jesus at some unspecified place and time by more than five hundred followers, most of whom were still alive in AD 53 or thereabouts, when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians...
It is noteworthy that although Paul refers to the burial of Jesus, he does not know or wish to mention the discovery of the empty tomb and the disappearance of the body of Christ.\textsuperscript{175}

As far as bodily resurrection goes, failing to mention the empty tomb is not merely an oversight by Paul because in contradiction to the Synoptics he actually believes that the resurrection is not a bodily one (and he does not need the physical body to disappear from the tomb). This spiritual resurrection of Christ becomes the pivot for his ideology of the spiritual resurrection of the natural body. Adam was a natural being but Jesus became a life-giving spirit, and it is through this spirit, through our existence in Christ, through our participation in his spiritual body that we are saved.

1 Corinthians 15: 42-54

\textsuperscript{42} So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; \textsuperscript{43} it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; \textsuperscript{44} it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. \textsuperscript{45} So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. \textsuperscript{46} The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. \textsuperscript{47} The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven. \textsuperscript{48} As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. \textsuperscript{49} And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.

\textsuperscript{50} I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...

\textsuperscript{53} For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. \textsuperscript{54} When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Of course, Christ is the first to swallow death up in victory and the rest of us must follow by being baptized into crucifixion and death, that is, by being baptized into Christ or even more simply by being in Christ. As Vermes notes:

As a Jew, Paul could not conceive of resurrection without envisaging some kind of body, but, combining his Jewish legacy with the Hellenistic ideas of his readers, he insisted that this body would be totally different from the one that had died. The risen body would be imperishable, glorious and powerful, bearing the image not of the mortal Adam, but that of the glorified Christ… Paul did not view baptism merely as a Jewish rite of purification by water. For him the pool symbolized the tomb where the body of Jesus had lain and where the resurrection took place. So when the candidates to be initiated into the Christian mystery were submerged in the baptismal waters, they mystically united themselves with the sin-effacing death of Christ. Afterwards, when they rose from the pool, they believed they started a new life issued from the resurrection of Jesus and became children of God.
Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6: 3-4; cf Col 2: 12).176

The resurrection of Christ is the pivotal event in Paul’s theology of death but he pays no attention to or has no knowledge of the historical event as related by the Synoptics. As Bishop John Shelby Spong notes:

For Paul there were no empty tombs, no disappearance from the grave of the physical body, no physical resurrection, no physical appearances of a Christ who would eat fish, offer his wounds for inspection, or rise physically into the sky after an appropriate length of time. None of these ideas can be found in reading Paul. For Paul the body of Jesus who died was perishable, weak, physical. The Jesus who was raised was clothed by the raising God with a body fit for God’s kingdom. It was imperishable, glorified, and spiritual.177

By any standard, Paul’s account of the resurrection is profoundly creative and eventually becomes the foundation for his assertion of Christ’s divinity. Vermes:

[Paul] solemnly declared that the man Jesus, born of a Jewish woman as a descendent of King David, rose to the dignity of the Son of God through his resurrection from the dead (Rom 1: 4). In other words, on the first Easter Sunday the status of Jesus underwent a fundamental change. The opening paragraph of the letter to the Romans marks the moment in the history of Christian literature when Jesus was formally proclaimed ‘Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness’ on account of his resurrection from the dead.178

Next we consider a comparison of the Synoptics with the Gospel of John. According to the Danish theologian, Peder Borgen, the author of the Gospel of John sought inspiration from Paul writings.179 This is already obvious from the fact that John, the last of the Gospels to be written, seems to sympathize with Paul’s account of an incorporeal resurrection. Despite allowing for the physical disappearance of the body and an empty tomb, and even allowing Mary to hold the resurrected Jesus, John also allows Jesus to walk through walls when doors are shut although, in the second instance, this is followed by a physical inspection of him by Thomas.

John 20: 19-20, 26-7
19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord...

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be
with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” (Italics added)

**Synoptics vs. John**

As far as the historical Jesus is concerned, suffice it to say that we cannot do better than the synoptic Gospels. His disciples fled or hid after the crucifixion event but were strengthened by visions of him (resurrection) and returned to Jerusalem to wait for the Kingdom of God that Jesus had predicted and that they believed was imminent. The point is that they were literally waiting for Jesus to return and were not concerned with collectively searching their memories of him or writing a biography of him. They did, however, preach his message and thus recalled illuminating incidents from his life in order to convince others including their factional opponents. This database of incidents was probably transmitted orally for a few decades. While this transmission preserved material from Jesus’ life, it could not have done so without the distortions that early followers (including growing numbers who had never met Jesus) would have introduced in order to strengthen their case. In other words, stories about Jesus were told outside their original context and within the context of the lives and challenges faced by the early proselytizers.

The material was being transmitted in set short forms, a convenient format that contained a small unit of material with a brief introduction and usually concluded with something Jesus said or did. There came a time when these small units (pericopes) were gathered into larger collections on the basis of subject matter, for example, on healing or on factional debate, and were ‘written on sheets of papyrus, copied, and circulated among various Christian communities'181. The next stage in redaction is the collection of these larger groupings in order to tell a connected - though not the whole - story. These were the proto-gospels. Finally, the gospels probably came to be written between the years 70 and 90 with Mark being first. Mark and the other two synoptics (Matthew and Luke) bear clear traces of this decades-long process of transmission and redaction. But John, the last of the canonical gospels to be written (probably early 2nd century182), is a far more unified and polished narrative that is clearly the work of a theologically more sophisticated author. It is for this reason considered a less authentic record of the historical Jesus. As Sanders observes:

> We note that the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) consist of movable pericopes. We know that the final authors moved pericopes, because some units are in one context in one gospel and another in another. We infer that this had been the case for some years, and probably for some decades.183

The historical evidence also tells us that we do not actually know who wrote the Gospels.184 Before the latter half of the second century they were always quoted anonymously. The names (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) appear suddenly after 150 A.D. (around 180 A.D. is the precise date Sanders’ research gives us). As Sanders observes, ‘it is unlikely that Christians knew the names of the authors of the gospels for a period of a hundred years or so, but did not mention them in any of the surviving literature (which is quite substantial)’.185 This comment is a classic understatement because if the Christians had known their names they would never have failed to mention them given the purpose of demonstrating the authenticity...
of their deeply cherished religious tradition. Sanders also throws light on the process of naming the gospels.

We now return to the story of naming the gospels. To members of the winning party (those who wanted four and only four gospels), it was important to be able to attribute the ‘right’ gospels to people who, historically, were closely connected with Jesus or his greatest apostles. Christian scholarly detectives went to work, and from details in the gospels, which they regarded as clues to authorship, they derived views about who wrote each gospel. One example: in the gospel that now stands fourth in the New Testament, an unnamed ‘beloved disciple’ is prominent. This gospel, however, does not mention John, even though he is one of the main disciples (as we know from the other gospels, Acts and Paul’s letter to Galatia). Second-century Christian detectives probably reasoned that the Fourth Gospel was written by John, who preferred to refer to himself as the ‘beloved disciple’, and accordingly we now call the Fourth Gospel ‘the Gospel according to John’. Here the second-century Christians inferred authorship from the non-occurrence of a name.186

The reason that the fourth Gospel was not immediately attributed to John has to be that there was no well-established tradition in favor of making such an attribution, and in fact the attribution was made quite late (for motives other than historical accuracy as Sanders points out). In the passage above, Sanders offered the fourth Gospel only as an example, but our purpose is to discuss the historical unreliability of the fourth Gospel as a record of the historical Jesus, in order to advance the point that the most reliable record available to us are the three synoptic Gospels. From our discussion on inter-factionalism we already have a good sense that the Synoptics portray Jesus as a reformer not an apostate. First of all, let us note that the fourth Gospel differs markedly in style from the Synoptics. Here also I will rely on Sanders for the additional reason that the discussion is somewhat technical.

Perhaps most striking is the difference in teaching style. In the synoptics we find short sayings on diverse topics. The only substantial discourses consist of a series of such sayings. The other main literary form is the parable, in which a simple story serves to make a point about God and his kingdom. The comparison is indicated by the phrase ‘is like’: the kingdom of God is like the following story. In literary terms the synoptic parables are based on the simile, and many are simply extended similes. In John there are lengthy and involved metaphorical discourses, notably lacking the word ‘like’, and therefore not similes. Most characteristic of John’s metaphorical discourses are the ‘I am’ sayings, such as ‘I am the true vine’ (John 15.1). This is a metaphor in which the author identifies Jesus as the reality that is indicated by the symbol. A vine is a symbol of life; Jesus is the real vine; therefore Jesus is life. He is not like something – in this case, a vine – but rather he is the only true vine. Similarly Jesus is bread (John 6.35), that is, the only real bread; everything else called bread is only a paltry imitation. Unlike the synoptic teaching material, in John there are no stories, no actions, that illustrate how God deals with people. Just as there are no synoptic-like similes in John, there are no symbolic metaphors in the synoptics.187

Of course the differences between John and the Synoptics are not limited to this matter of style. The substantive content of the message is also different.188 In the Synoptic sayings Jesus is primarily concerned with the kingdom of God. To be sure, this kingdom does not belong to
Jesus but rather to God and in fact as a general rule the Synoptic Jesus rarely speaks of himself. But in John the kingdom of God is referred to only at one point (John 3.3-5)! Not only this, Jesus is himself the principal subject of his discourses and he publicly elaborates on 'his status, his identity and his relation to God and to the disciples' 189. This is in stark contrast to the Synoptics where he avoids offering direct comments regarding his own status. When asked about his authority he simply asks about the authority of John the Baptist rather than commenting on himself (Mark 11.27-33). He refuses to give a sign of his authority in the Synoptics (Mark 8.11f), but in John he gives a series of 'signs' of his status and authority (John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:48, 54; 6:2, 14; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47; 12:8, 37; 20:30). All of this goes towards establishing that the author of the fourth Gospel had a Christological axe to grind. Two further observations seem to seal this view. First, in the Synoptics, most of Jesus' short mission (probably about 12 months) unfolds in Galilee with a final visit to Jerusalem (in Roman Judea) for Passover where he interferes with some buying and selling in the Temple (that Jews saw as necessary for the continuation of Temple service) and is put on trial and executed. But John puts the Temple incident early in his Gospel thereby making Jerusalem central to the mission and the traditional power of Judaism the real opponent. This brings the conflict between Jesus and Judaism to the fore in a manner that is useful for advancing a theological theme (Jesus vs. Judaism was a favorite of Christology) but far too artificial to be an accurate historical account. Second, the Synoptics have Friday, 15 Nisan as the date of Jesus' execution while John has Friday, 14 Nisan. There is of course plenty of reason for John to want the latter date because the Passover lamb was sacrificed on the fourteenth and John depicts Jesus as the real sacrificial lamb. Sanders:

In describing Jesus' death, John wrote that the soldiers did not break Jesus' legs, as they did those of the other two men, since scripture (the Hebrew Bible) had said, 'Not a bone of him shall be broken' (John 19.36). This quotation refers to the Passover lamb (Pss. 34.20; Exod. 12.46; Num. 9.12). In John 1.36 Jesus is called 'the lamb of God', and the equation Jesus = lamb has determined John's dating of the crucifixion. 190

For these reasons, the Synoptics are widely accepted as the most accurate account available on Jesus' life. The picture of Jesus that they give us is that of a Jewish reformer engaged in inter-factional argument especially with the Pharisees. The pericopes of the Synoptics can only be seen as a series of inter-factional dialogues and cannot bear the weight of any greater ideological controversy. In them, Jesus is actually silent about his own status and does not respond positively when others try to give him the title of the Messiah. 191 In them, he never refers to himself as the Son of God except once (in the Markan trial scene which is most likely a later revision, as I will shortly explain 192). Contrast this with his open and public declarations in John both to being the Messiah (e.g. John 4:25-6) and the one and only Son of God (e.g. John 3:16-8). Dunn writes:

The points at which the Fourth Gospel makes its highest and most unequivocal claims regarding Jesus are all points where the Fourth Gospel goes beyond the Synoptics' portrayal of Jesus. (1) Jesus as the Son. In the Synoptics Jesus rarely speaks of God as Father. But in John this language is all pervasive. So, for example, the talk of Jesus as the Son sent by the Father, that is from heaven (about forty times in John), is something we never find in the Synoptic accounts... (3) Not least, there is the whole new category of sayings of Jesus – the 'I am's' ('I am the bread of life', 'I am the light of

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the world’, etc.) including 8.58: ‘Before Abraham was, I am’. There is nothing like them in the Synoptics. If they were historical, their omission by the Synoptic Evangelists is absolutely astonishing and inexplicable.193

While Jesus does not call himself the son of God in the Synoptics (except in the Markan trial scene discussed below), others did call him that and so we still have to get a sense of what they could have meant by such a title. Of course what they meant is no longer a matter of controversy and so I can once again simply quote either Sanders or Dunn on this issue. By ‘Son of God’ the first followers of Jesus meant that he was especially favored by God and was chosen for a mission of great importance. They did not mean what post-Nicean Christians meant, namely, that Jesus was the supernatural son of a supernatural God. Dunn:

It often comes, therefore, as something of a shock to realize that it was not the same pre-Nicea – not, at any rate, at the time of Jesus. At the time of Jesus, in Jewish thinking of the early first century, ‘son of God’ was not a specific title or description. (1) In the Jewish scriptures it could be used collectively of Israel (Ex. 4.22; Jer. 31.9; Hos. 11.1), or in the plural in reference to angels, the heavenly council (e.g. Gen. 6.2, 4; Job 1.6-12), or in the singular of the king (II Sam. 7.14; Ps. 2.7; 89.26-7)... (3) More striking still is the fact that the righteous man could also be called God’s son (e.g. Sir. 4.10; Wisd. 2.13, 16, 18; Pss. Sol. 13.8). And also charismatic rabbis, like Honi ‘the circle drawer’ (first century BCE), who prayed to God like a son of the house, and Hanina ben Dosa (from the generation after Jesus), whom a heavenly voice addresses as ‘My son’ (m. Taan 3.8; b. Taan 24b)... We need not belabor the point, since it is clear enough. At the time of Jesus ‘son of God’ was a way of characterizing someone who was thought to be commissioned by God or highly favored by God. It was not necessarily a title of divinity; not only angels were sons of God. The idea of Jesus as ‘God’s son’ need only imply such a commissioning by God of one specially favored by God. As used of Jesus, initially at least, ‘son of God’ did not necessarily imply any overtones of divinity. And in terms of Jesus’ own self-consciousness, all we can talk about with full confidence is of his sense of intimate sonship to God as Father, whose nearest parallels would place him among the righteous of the Wisdom literature or identify him as a charismatic rabbi like Honi or Hanina.194

The thrust of this discussion has been to show that Jesus never claimed to be a supernatural being. The one title that he did often use for himself was ‘Son of Man’ and he did this most often in response to other titles being thrust upon him. The expression simply means man-like and has the obvious implication that Jesus thought he was mortal. Rather than accept grand ambitions for himself as ‘the royal Messiah’ and ‘Son of God’ he would often revert to the more down-to-earth talk about the suffering and sacrifice that his mission entailed.195 My discussion reinforces this view because it shows that the Pharisees never saw Jesus as making the outlandish claim that he was supernatural. Had he claimed to be literally the son of God then it is ridiculous to think that they would have engaged him as they did on minor points of the law. More naturally, they would have simply cast him out of the Jewish fold. That Jesus could not have claimed to be the literal son of God is further reinforced by the fact that his followers in Jerusalem continued to organize their worship around the Temple for decades after him. Had they upheld a belief in his divinity they would probably have been expelled not only from the Temple but from Jerusalem as well (they were eventually forced to leave
Jerusalem after the Jewish revolt and destruction of the Temple ca. 70 A.D.). Thus, it is not a historically credible position to believe that Jesus’ self-consciousness of himself was that he was a supernatural being. Tying this into our earlier discussion, the historical record does not give us sufficient reason to defend the Trinity against an assault from logic and simplicity. *Au contraire*, the historical record portrays Jesus as mortal.

*The Psychology of Rejection*

Historical research and rational psychology may also be combined to arrive at another critical result, namely, that the Jewish high priestly faction did not have sufficient reason to reject Jesus’ authority and this is probably also true of present day Jews. But first, we need to set the record straight as to who really wanted Jesus dead. Traditionally, this role was given to the Pharisees but recent research has rendered this theory historically untenable. The Pharisees play virtually no role in the narratives of the last week of his life (the passion narratives of the Gospels) that led to the execution order. Dunn:

Most important is the fact that Pharisees hardly feature at all in the passion narratives of the Gospels. In Mark no mention is made of Pharisees after 12.13 (early in passion week). In Matthew Pharisees appear only at 27.62 subsequent to the polemic of ch. 23. In Luke no mention is made of Pharisees after 19.39 (the entry into Jerusalem). And in John the only mention made of Pharisees after ch. 12 is 18.13. Contrast the use of *archiereis* (high priests) – 16 times in Mark 14-15; 19 times in Matt. 26-28; 13 times in Luke 19-24; and 14 times in John 18-19. Quite clearly, so far as the passion narratives themselves are concerned, on the Jewish side the chief actors in bringing about the death of Jesus were the high priests; Pharisees may not have had much, if indeed any part in it!\(^{196}\)

Given the central importance of this point we would do well to get Sanders to comment on it as well:

... the Pharisees are almost entirely absent from the last chapters of the gospels, and completely absent from the stories of the arrest and trial. According to the evidence, they had nothing to do with these events. The synoptic descriptions of the high priest and his council agree 100 percent with Josephus’ description of how Jerusalem was governed when it was part of a Roman province. The high priest and the chief priests are the primary actors, and the Pharisees play no role at all.\(^{197}\)

All of this fits in well with my earlier analysis. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, Jesus was an unconventional Jewish teacher or at worse the leader of a rival faction and that was *not* in those times reason enough to call for someone’s death. But if Jesus was not making outlandish claims about supernatural status then why would any Jew want him dead. After all, if his claims were within the bounds of Judaism and were realistic then he was neither an apostate nor delusional. We can begin to solve this mystery by observing that apostasy and delusion are black and white categories and any claims based on such clear deviation rarely offend or threaten. The times that people *really* feel threatened are when the claims are realistic and believable, and also much closer to home. I believe that this was precisely the
nature of Jesus’ claims and because of them he managed to get some very influential people in Jerusalem very upset.

Jesus spent the last week of his mission in Jerusalem where he had come for the Passover festival with his disciples. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people came to Jerusalem for this event and this year (30 A.D.) was no different. The following is a convenient summary based on the Synoptics (and adapted from Sanders\(^\text{196}\)) of the events that led to his execution order.

1. Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey thereby fulfilling a prophecy in Zechariah 9.9; people welcomed him by shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming’ (Mark 11.9f). According to Matthew and Luke, they explicitly called him ‘son of David’ or ‘king’ (Matt. 21.9; Luke 19.38).


3. He shared a last supper with his disciples and spoke as though he was a marked man who should be remembered for the sacrifice he made. As he distributed the bread and drink he spoke of them metaphorically as his body and blood given for many (Mark 14.22-5; Luke 22.17-20; see also I Corinthians 11.24-6).

4. The high priest’s guards arrested him and took him before the high priest and his council. Witnesses accused him of having threatened to destroy the Temple, but he was not convicted. The high priest, however, persisted with the trial and finally convicted him for blasphemy.

5. His captors sent him to Pilate, who interrogated him and then ordered that he be crucified for claiming to be ‘king of the Jews’ (Mark 15.1-5, 15, 18, 26 with parallels in Matt. & Luke).

If one examines this series of events there may be some reason to flog the person responsible but certainly no reason to kill him. As a result, our analysis will have to be a psychological one that attempts to pinpoint the reasons that Jesus was such a threat to the high priestly faction that recommended his execution. Events (1) and (2) reflect the threat that Jesus posed. Event (1) is evidence of the growing acceptance among Jews that Jesus had some special spiritual status (whatever that status may be, as already mentioned he shied away from the titles being given to him in (1)). If the high priest, Joseph Caiaphas, and his colleagues in the Sanhedrin\(^\text{199}\) (high priestly council) were not aware of Jesus’ preaching in Galilee then they would have become aware of it when Jesus was welcomed by the people in Jerusalem. This is because the high priest and his advisers had to preserve order especially during festivals when the Romans were on high alert for signs of rebellion. Failure to maintain order meant that the Roman prefect of Judea, at this time Pontius Pilate, would intervene militarily.\(^\text{200}\) Thus, the high priestly faction would have been alerted by the entry into Jerusalem of a prophetic figure being hailed as king, because prophets and kings can create rebellion, especially one such who saw fit to disrupt the routine commerce that sustained the Temple service (event (2)). By carrying out arrests and judging cases (as they did in the case of Jesus) the high priestly faction acted as a buffer that prevented a direct Roman intervention and possible Jewish clash with
Roman troops. Sanders’ view is that this is all that is needed to explain the action against Jesus. Caiaphas and his advisers were simply doing their duty, putting down trouble makers especially during the festival, and preventing uprisings and bloody clashes with troops. Sanders:

It is highly probable, however, that Caiaphas was primarily or exclusively concerned with the possibility that Jesus would incite a riot. He sent armed guards to arrest Jesus, he gave him a hearing, and he recommended execution to Pilate, who promptly complied. That is the way the gospels describe the events, and that is the way things really happened, as the numerous stories in Josephus prove (italics added).

But Sanders explanation on this point is quite inadequate. He is of course right in so far as he maintains that the high priestly faction acted as governors for the Romans:

The Roman prefect or procurator had to maintain domestic tranquility and collect tribute. Both tasks he turned over to Jewish aristocrats, especially the priestly aristocrats, headed by the high priest. Rome’s choice of the high priest respected Jewish tradition. Judea had been ruled by high priests for several centuries.

He even goes so far as to observe (correctly) that these were Jewish priests whose loyalties also lay with their own people. But his mistake is to completely discount in his explanation the status that these priests had because of this second constituency (namely, the Jewish people, their first constituency being the Romans). Specifically, he does not include the threat to the priests’ Jewish status as part of the motivation for arresting, trying, and handing over Jesus to Pilate.

The high priest had other obligations to the populace than just the need to prevent clashes with Roman troops. He should also represent their views to the prefect, and he should stand up for Jewish customs and traditions. He was the man in the middle. This second responsibility was important, but it plays no role in our story (italics added).

It seems obvious that Sanders has made a mistake in failing to give the Jewish identity of the high priestly faction a role in the final recommendation of Jesus’ execution. I find it incredible that the chief priests were simply acting in their capacity as good Roman citizens, that they were simply trying to keep order during the Passover festival. It is very difficult not to see that they had darker motives. But what could these motives possibly be? This is not exactly a deeply puzzling question. Ever since people have lived in settled agricultural communities, there has been a concentration of wealth and women within a relatively densely populated area. Men in power have vied for control of both and invariably the men in power have been a ruling class and a high priesthood. Their collusion is as old as a settled agricultural mode of life. So yes, one does not have to look far to find dark motives, but there is still the problem of telling a convincing story about what precisely motivated the chief priests of Jerusalem in 30 A.D. to act in collusion with their Roman overseers. In the case before us, we may ask why it was in their self-interest to use the Romans to get rid of a Jewish problem. This is a far more specific question and the answer to it lies in event (2) where Jesus engages in a symbolic act of defiance against the existing religious order, and also in event (3) where he shows a keen awareness of how deeply he has wounded that order. We must begin first by seeing event (2) as a symbolic action. Of course, what else could it be because, as Sanders also observes, Jesus had nothing to gain from roughing up a few money-changers and dove-sellers.
If people could not buy sacrificial doves in the commercial area of the Temple, how could they get them? If they carried them from their dovecotes at home, the birds might become blemished. And the money-changers offered a mere convenience for pilgrims. The Temple required payment of the Temple tax in a reliable coinage, one that was not subject to adulteration by the admixture of too much base metal (a method often used by governments that were short of cash). People could acquire this reliable Tyrian coinage anywhere, as far as the Temple was concerned, but apparently many preferred to bring their own currency and change it at the Temple.206

I am going to assume that Jesus had a keen and critical eye on the sociopolitical order and its workings. I am going to assume that he was not simple-minded. I think that we must grant him this given that he spoke with a great and wise authority during his entire mission and always seemed to know the time of day. I propose that Jesus knew who his real enemies were and he knew that it was the high priestly faction. There are common sense historical parallels of this with other prophets such as Moses and Muhammad. The latter, a case I know relatively better, was bitterly opposed by the Meccan aristocracy that seems to have had a controlling interest in North-South and East-West trade through Mecca. When they learned that Muhammad wanted his one God to replace all the gods of the Ka’ba (the Meccan Temple) they saw this as a direct challenge not only to their religion but really to their way of life. The idols in the Ka’ba and surrounding areas had for centuries attracted pilgrims from all over Arabia and had turned Mecca into a natural destination on the trade routes. At Muhammad’s time, it seems to have become a thriving commercial center but his simple cry (there is only one God) struck right at the heart of Meccan commerce and the aristocratic way of life that it sustained. His final solution for the Meccan aristocracy was a 10,000 strong Medinese army, and this gives us a sense of what it takes to knock sense into men in power. But Jesus was different. He did not preach to pagans (as Muhammad did). As a result, he was not dealing with just any aristocracy but rather with a priestly aristocracy, namely, the Jewish priesthood. But priests are also people and so this does not change the power dynamics in any way. The Meccans tried to kill Muhammad and the chief priests sent Jesus to be executed. If you look at this from a universal perspective or at a deep level there is really no difference. It’s all human nature.

If Muhammad offers a parallel of sorts, our question becomes how was Jesus a direct threat to the priestly aristocratic system of Jerusalem in the year 30? Once again we have the advantage of Sanders’ meticulous scholarship (although we do not have to go along with his conclusions).

Support of the Temple and its ministers was a major aspect of Jewish life: Temple tax, agricultural tithes, minor agricultural offerings (‘first fruits’), redemption of first-born sons and animals, sin and guilt offerings, festivals, offerings of animals to provide food for banquets and festivities – Temple worship, in one way or another, affected every area of life... The Temple was central to Palestinian Judaism and important to all Jews everywhere.207

I think it will be an understatement to say that the high priestly faction was well-placed. At the deep level of our analysis, their situation was not relevantly different from that of 7th century Meccan aristocracy. Beyond any benefits that the Romans could give them, money and goods were pouring in not only from the Hebrew Jews of Jerusalem and its environs but from the entire Greek speaking Jewish diaspora. This was, after all, the Temple built by Solomon (ca. 520-515 B.C) and one of the four pillars of Second Temple Judaism (ca. 515 B.C – 70 A.D.). But
if we assume, as I do, that Jesus knew his enemies (as event (3) strongly suggests), then in what way can his actions be seen as a symbolic demonstration against the high priestly faction. In keeping with the tenor of my assumptions, I propose that Jesus knew how to make a symbolic gesture that would go straight to the hearts of his target audience. He overturned the tables of the money-changers because they were giving people the ‘reliable coinage’ with which to pay the Temple tax (for ‘the Temple and its ministers’ (italics added)). He overturned the seats of the pigeon-sellers because they were giving people the animals to be sacrificed as offerings, symbolically to God but physically (some portion of the animal) to please the people of God, namely, the priests. He quoted scripture saying that this was meant to be a house for prayer but had been made into ‘a den of robbers’. The robbers being referred to are the high priestly faction (and everyone working at a lower level in their entourage such as the Levite clergy). Recall that in the parable of the Good Samaritan it is the priest and the Levite that walk right past the injured man out of a concern for ritual purity. Only the Samaritan, who was not even considered to be a Jew by many factions, came to the aid of his fellow man and was a true neighbor to him. Of course this is not simply a question of one parable. This is a theme in the sayings of Jesus. He keeps reminding Israel not to take its election by God (another pillar of Jewish faith) for granted. In Mark 12: 9, Jesus offers the parable of the vineyard of God taken from its rebellious tenants and given to others. In Luke, he gives the following heart-rending scenario at the end of time.

There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.
People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.

It is impossible to miss the thrust of that last sentence. These words are addressed to Israel and there can be no doubt that the high priestly faction is the ‘first’ of Israel on Earth. This is because they had both the favor of the Romans and the highest respect of the Jewish populace. To repeat the understatement, they were well-placed (or to use a colloquialism, they ‘had it good’). But, according to Jesus, the first on Earth will be the last in the kingdom of God! Jesus openly declares the identity of his archenemy! At the same time, people will come from all over the world (‘east and west and north and south’) and be welcomed in the kingdom of God. He refers to those who are last but will be first in God’s kingdom. The following incident illustrates this.

Matthew 8: 5-13
When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. “Lord,” he said, “my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering.” Jesus said to him, “I will go and heal him.” The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed”...
When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom
will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of
teeth.” Then Jesus said to the centurion, “Go! It will be done just as you believed it
would.” And his servant was healed at that very hour.

So in the kingdom of God places are reversed and the centurion is first and the high priest is
last. Event (3) gives us every indication that Jesus knew his enemies and also that his time had
come. He declared the supper with his disciples to be his last, ‘Truly, I say to you, I shall not
drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God’
(Mark 14.25; Luke 22.18). Sanders:

The saying makes it highly probable that Jesus knew he was a marked man.
Conceivably he thought that God would intervene before he was arrested and
executed. In any case he did not flee. He went to the Mount of Olives to pray and to
wait – to wait for the reaction of the authorities and possibly the intervention of God.
According to the gospels, he prayed to be spared, but he did so completely privately
(Mark 14.32-42 [with parallels in Matt. & Luke]). The prayer that they attribute to
Jesus, however, is perfectly reasonable. He hoped that he would not die, but he
resigned himself to the will of God. 208

We ought never to forget this human side of Jesus and Dunn notes his ‘great distress’ at the
Mount of Olives (Gethsemane) and critically also that such human frailties are set aside in the
fourth Gospel.

In the Synoptics Jesus is portrayed as a man who needed to pray, sometimes all night,
and in the garden of Gethsemane with great distress (Mark 14.33; ‘with loud cries and
tears’ – Heb. 5.7); and as one who warned against praying for show (Matt. 6.5). But in
the Fourth Gospel Jesus is portrayed rather as one who is so far above events that no
real prayer is necessary; and the parody of prayer in John 11.41-42 (‘I have said this on
account of the crowd standing by...’) simply underlines how far removed is the
Johannine Jesus from the Synoptic Jesus, and thus also, at these points at least, from
the historical Jesus. 209

Given his behavior it seems obvious that Jesus knew what was coming. So event (3) gives
strong indications of Jesus’ awareness of his enemies and of his imminent arrest. Let’s go to
event (4). Sanders neatly pinpoints the crucial turning point of this event. At his trial before the
Sanhedrin, Jesus is charged with having said something about the destruction of the Temple
but a string of witnesses fail to agree with each other on what it was that he had said. As a
result, the charge is thrown out of court. Instead of ending the trial possibly with a flogging for
Jesus because of his odd behavior in the Temple (event (2)), Caiaphas (high priest) continued
with the trial. Why? Sanders believes that it is because Caiaphas had already decided that
Jesus had to be killed. I think that this is absolutely right. But as I have already said, Sanders
gives Caiaphas a motive that is superficial, namely, maintaining law and order and thereby
keeping his job. I think Sanders’ view on this point is quite naive. As far as I can see, Caiaphas
and his comrades come across as people with evil motives. I believe that for Caiaphas and his
comrades the whole Jesus affair had become personal. Jesus had declared their Temple to be a
den of robbers, in other words, they were robbers. I believe that the chief priests had
understood what Jesus meant to say, namely, that they were taking money in the name of God
but not really doing His will. They were robbing people of wealth in the name of a cause that
they did not advance, and worst of all that cause was God! Rather than advance the cause, they followed Rome’s will or whatever other strategy protected their way of life. So I think that in the trial room one of the problems was that the egos of the judges had been deeply wounded by the defendant. The other problem was that Jesus was a real threat to their way of life. He was a rising star and no other leader could inspire the energy of the crowds that followed him. The members of the Sanhedrin had the choice either to kill him and protect their way of life or follow him and abandon their way of life.210 This is much the same choice as the Meccan aristocracy had vis a vis Muhammad. In the end, Muhammad took that choice away from them by conquering them. But the Sanhedrin had absolute power over Jesus. If they sent him to Pilate he would be immediately executed. Sanders:

Philo, who was Pilate’s contemporary, wrote an appeal to the emperor Gaius (Caligula), which included a description of Pilate. Philo wrote of ‘the briberies, the insults, the robberies, the outrages and wanton injuries, the executions without trial constantly repeated, the ceaseless and supremely grievous cruelty’ that marked Pilate’s rule (Embassy to Gaius 302). Moreover, Pilate was eventually dismissed from office because of large-scale and ill-judged executions (Antiq. 18.88f.). This evidence agrees precisely with the sequence of events that the gospels narrate: Jesus appeared before Pilate and was executed almost immediately, with no further witnesses and with no trial procedure. The stories of Pilate’s reluctance and weakness of will are best explained as Christian propaganda; they are a kind of excuse for Pilate’s action which reduces the conflict between the Christian movement and Roman authority.211

So the Sanhedrin knew that to recommend execution to Pilate was death for Jesus. This ought to have made their work easier but there was still the minor problem of convicting him. It is natural that the high priest would decide to do this under the old favorite all-encompassing charge of blasphemy. He obviously well knew the kinds of moves he could make. But it would seem that Jesus did not oblige him in this by uttering any blasphemous claim which is precisely why the high priest had to give a clever little performance in order to secure the conviction.

Let’s take a look at the record of the trial. Once the charge of threatening the destruction of the Temple was thrown out of court, Caiaphas decided to keep the trial going. He asked Jesus a leading question regarding his titles, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed?” Now as we have already seen, in the Synoptics Jesus evades questions on his titles be it Messiah, royal Messiah, or son of God. According to Matthew and Luke he does so here as well responding ‘You have said so’ (Matthew 26.59-68) or ‘You say that I am’ (Luke 22.66-71). In Mark, and for the first and last time in the Synoptics, he openly (publicly) accepts both titles. This is highly uncharacteristic of him and as Dunn points out his response ‘I am’ (Mark 14.62) is probably a later revision and shortening of the more natural response ‘You say that I am’.212 The motive for the revision would naturally be Christological, namely, for later Christians to show that Jesus publicly accepted these titles for himself. But as Sanders observes, “we do not have to decide whether Jesus answered ‘yes’ or ‘maybe’. The high priest had already made up his mind.”213 Even the answer ‘yes’ would have required further investigation because there is no black and white reason why Jesus could not be Messiah or son of God. These titles had vague definitions. But according to the Synoptics the trial ended there. Caiaphas tore his clothing and said that no more witnesses were required because they had heard blasphemy (Mark 14.55-65, Matt. 26.59-68). Now why would the high priest rend his garments? Sanders explains:
Tearing one’s garments was a powerful sign of mourning, and showing the signs of mourning had persuasive power... For the high priest to tear his clothing was the most extreme sign of mourning, since the Bible forbids him to tear his garments, or even to dishevel his hair (Lev. 21.10). Caiaphas’ transgression of the law showed horror. Few Jews would have denied him what he wanted, and certainly not his own counsellors. Jesus was sent to Pilate.214

Thus, even if Caiaphas had no substantive reason to tear his clothes he certainly seems to have made out as if he had such reason. I personally believe that he had to be quite an actor and also that he knew the power of symbol much in the way Jesus also knew how to make use of symbol the only difference being that Caiaphas used that power to send an innocent man for execution. In handing Jesus over to Pilate, the high priest seems to have tailored the charge against him to have a more political overtone.215 Jesus was claiming to be ‘the king of the Jews’. So Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” and Jesus responded characteristically, “You say so” (Mark 15.2; Matt. 27.11; Luke 23.3). As Dunn observes:

... the answers are tantamount to saying, ‘The words are yours, not mine’; ‘That’s your way of putting it.’ Once again, then, there is indication on the part of Jesus of an unwillingness to accept what those who put the question would understand by the term (Messiah/King).216

The conduct of the high priestly faction seems to have vindicated Jesus in his views of them. They give every appearance of being in a hurry to execute him. I have tried to explain why, and Dunn seems to concur with my reasoning:

In the event, Jesus was denounced by the High Priestly party not so much for blasphemy (whatever the language used), but rather as a political threat to their power and power base (the Temple). It was as such that he was crucified – not because he dared to say that he was God’s son, but on the political charge of being ‘King of the Jews’.217

But the main point is that the high priests were against Jesus because of his brand of Judaism and the threat that this posed to them as representatives of Jewish theism. In other words, they were mainly against him in their capacity as representatives of Jewish theism and not, as Sanders would have it, in their capacity as representatives of the Roman occupation. Jesus was a threat to their Jewish identity and the power that it afforded. Meier also supports this basic position.

[I]n Meier’s view, and in contrast to the views of many historians, including Sanders, there is no significant puzzle about why Jesus was put to death. He says that what moved Caiaphas to action in arresting Jesus included, first, Jesus’ proclamation that the definitive kingdom of God was soon to come, ending the present state of affairs and restoring Israel to its glory by reconstituting it as the twelve tribes in the end of time; second, his claim to teach God’s will authoritatively, even when this seemed to run counter to the Law of Moses; third, his ability to attract a large following, and perhaps his decision to form a stable inner circle of twelve disciples, representing the twelve patriarchs and the twelve tribes of a restored Israel; his practice of a special rite of baptism to admit persons into his group of disciples; and, finally, his “freewheeling personal conduct that expressed itself in table fellowship with toll collectors and
sinned.” Taken together, Meier says, these words and deeds of Jesus were “disturbing enough.” But if one adds to this already “volatile mix” the likelihood that some of Jesus’ followers believed him to be the Davidic Messiah expected by pious Jews, and that Jesus sometimes spoke in a veiled fashion of his own future role in the eschatological drama, perhaps even using special self-designations or titles then the mix becomes “positively explosive.”

Given the positively explosive mix, Jesus himself shows an awareness that his responses to the Sanhedrin are not going to make a difference one way or another. What could have made a difference was a retreat from his position, as Sanders comments, if ‘he had promised to take his disciples, return to Galilee and keep his mouth shut’219. But that was never on the cards.

What then is our final say on the psychological malady of the chief priests? They were the chief priests, the highest representatives of Jewish theism. A Jewish theist has to trust Moses and the prophets and above all has to trust that the source of scripture and law is God and not some devil that was deceiving the prophets. In order to be theists they had to allow the emotion of trust to flow freely. But once the river of trust is flowing then it must always flow unless there is sufficient reason to dam it. Their problem was that Jesus did not give them sufficient reason. Their theistic identity was based on the psychology of trust and if they had applied psychological principles consistently they would have had to trust him. But if they had trusted him they would have lost their worldly authority and influence and so they chose not to trust him. However, they did so without sufficient reason.

This straightforward psychological analysis is borne out by the Stephen affair. This incident took place after Jesus when the apostles were engaged in early proselytizing activity at a time when the followers of the Nazarene sect were being persecuted by their Jewish brethren. Stephen was a young Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew, who had become a follower of the Nazarene sect. He was arrested on the charge of blasphemy against God and Moses and because people claimed to have heard him say that Jesus will destroy the Temple (Acts 6.11-14). He was obviously an intelligent and eloquent young man because when he was brought before the Sanhedrin he gave a profound speech in his own defense (Acts 7). He began with a short history of the people of Israel from Abraham to Moses. I believe that this was a deliberate demonstration of his own faith and no one who heard those words could have doubted that Stephen believed in God and the prophets. But at the same time, Stephen made two scathing criticisms.220 The first was that the chief priests were getting all worked up about the Temple even though God did not dwell in a temple or any other particular place. The presence of God was not confined to one land or building.221 Rather God had revealed Himself to Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses outside the promised land and maybe in the wilderness but not in a temple. The second was that the Israelites had a long and infamous history of rejecting the prophets and Jesus was the most recent instance of this. Before this the patriarchs (Jacob’s eleven sons) had cast out Joseph, and the Hebrews had abandoned Moses to worship the calf made with hands. Stephen used this last image, ‘made with hands’, to imply that the Jerusalem Temple was also an idol (made with hands) and that Jesus had been rejected for its sake. Dunn explains:

‘Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands’ (v. 48). This last would be the most shocking feature of the Hellenist exposition. The adjective chosen, cheiropoieton, ‘made with hands’, would be a horrifying word to use in this context.
Why so? Because that was the word used by Hellenistic Jews to condemn idolatry, just this word summing up the typically dismissive Jewish polemic that Gentile gods were human artifacts, ‘made with hands’. The idol was by definition to cheiropoieton, ‘the thing made by human hands’; an implication which any Greek speaking Jew, and Luke too, could not mistake, since the word had already been used with this disparaging overtone in v. 41 (cf. also 17.24). For just that word to be used of the Temple would certainly have sent shock waves through any Jewish audience or readership – the Temple itself a breach of that most fundamental axiom of Israelite/Jewish religion, that God’s presence cannot be encapsulated or represented in any physical or man-made entity! – the Temple itself an idol! A proper parallel would be if an Englishman claimed that the Queen was illegitimate.

But the speech is not yet finished. In vv. 49-50 there follows immediately a quotation from Isa. 66.1-2, one of the strongest critiques of a false evaluation of the Temple in the whole of Jewish scripture:

Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool.
What house will you build for me, says the Lord,
or what is the place of my rest?
Did not my hand make all these things?²²²

Dunn is clearly right and the point is worth repeating. Stephen quoted one of the deepest indictments (Isaiah 66.1-2) of a culture that had attached excessive importance to a human artifact – the Temple. The chief priests and the clergy depended far too much economically, politically, and religiously on the Temple even though most of the history of the prophets unfolded in the absence of a temple. The prophets had commived with God in deserts and wildernesses. It is evident that Stephen was a reformer after Jesus’ heart. He uses the primal power of basic scriptural concepts such as the curse of idolatry to tear down later accretions such as the centrality of the Temple cult. But getting back to our main discussion, he seems to have driven a stake through the hearts of his listeners. This is what happened after his speech:

Acts 7: 54-58
When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.

Thus, according to Luke-Acts, Stephen was stoned to death. There is no doubt that he had deeply wounded the egos of his listeners for they were the highest representatives of Jewish theism but in Stephen’s eyes they were as blind to truth as any other idol worshipper!

A Note on Ideological Creativity in the Early Church
The Jews that followed Jesus were both Hebrew and Hellenist. In other words, both Hebrew and Hellenist Jews had become followers of the Nazarene sect (of Judaism). It is generally
agreed that the earliest persecution of the followers of the Nazarene sect was at the hands of Hellenist Jews who primarily targeted their Hellenist brethren who had chosen to follow the sect of the Nazarene.\(^224\) This was the case with Stephen who had been delivered to the authorities by his Hellenist Jewish brethren (Acts 6.8-12). As the persecution seems to have focused on the Hellenist (Jewish) Nazarenes and not as much on the Hebrew (Jewish) Nazarenes, the latter continued to frequent the Temple in Jerusalem for decades after Jesus. But for the Hellenist Nazarenes, the persecution seems to have severely restricted their access to the Temple and they were confined to house churches in order to fulfill their religious needs.\(^224\) In any case, Hellenist Nazarenes were not local residents and lived in the Jewish diaspora where they did not have access to the Temple anyway. This alienation from the Temple seems to have created a need for a substitute for the Temple cult especially the sacrificial offering for expiation of sin. In all likelihood, it is this persecution and alienation that is the psychosocial reason for the creation by Hellenist Nazarenes of a theology around the death of Jesus.\(^225\) The theology was ingenious in that it eliminated the need to go to the Temple and make a sin offering. It seems that not long after the crucifixion event the Hellenists introduced the idea that Christ had died for our sins, and so there is no longer any need to make sin offerings because Christ had already made the final and ultimate offering, he had offered himself, and because this was the ultimate sacrifice it was made in expiation of all our sins. There was no longer need to go to the Temple and all that was really required now was to remember the sacrifice of Christ. While creative, such an ideology had no real basis in the self-consciousness of Jesus and so we ought to offer a psychosocial explanation for it along the lines that I have indicated above (persecution, alienation). It is conceivable that the new ideology had some textual basis in the sense that sacrifice was a theme of Jesus’ mission, but there is a world of difference between sacrifice - or even sacrifice for others (as indicated in event (3) above) - and dying for all our sins. Why should our sins have been worked into the formula? The only credible answer is that the Hellenists were alienated from the sin offering in the Temple and Christ dying for all our sins made the sin offering unnecessary. In the same way, there seems to be considerable interpretive freedom in co-opting the title of Christ for Jesus (\textit{christos} is Greek for Messiah) given that Jesus never warmed to the title (see endnote 191). This is already reminiscent of the later co-opting of ‘Son of God’ to mean that he was not merely human. In any event, the title of Christ finally gave a new name to the Jewish sect of the Nazarene, and they began to be called Christ-ians. Why not ‘Nazarenes’ or some derivative of ‘Jesus’? The answer is probably because they were conscious that their leader had to have a status that could be given an age-old Jewish title, in this case, Messiah or Christ.

We know that ‘Christ died for our sins’ is an early development because Paul clearly indicates that he was taught this when he converted.\(^226\) As Paul was also a Hellenist Nazarene he was probably taught this by earlier Hellenist followers of Jesus. Paul took Hellenist creativity another step forward. He said that God’s presence was not in any Temple (remember Stephen) but rather in the body of Christ (this is way beyond Stephen). Where is the body of Christ? To this Paul had a surprising answer. We Christians are the body of Christ. Whenever we gather in the remembrance of Christ, God’s presence is in us!\(^227\) This is a decidedly convoluted way of saying what Stephen had said very clearly before the Sanhedrin, namely, that God is everywhere. If Sanders and Dunn had been present in Jerusalem a couple of millennia ago, they could have taken an objective scholarly view of things and said that the lesson we must draw from Jesus’ sacrifice is that God is everywhere and can favor anyone and for that reason Jews should not be self-righteous. More realistically, if Stephen had lived, this is precisely what
he would have preached. Paul, however, is not being objective and is psychosocially compelled to drag Christ into the picture. We do not communion with God because He is everywhere, rather we communion with God through the body of Christ! For a person who was pleased by down-to-earth conversation, this could not go down too well with Jesus.

Having said that, we must give Paul credit for picking up on a genuine theme in Jesus’ thought, namely, that people would enter the kingdom of God from ‘east and west and north and south’. Accordingly, Paul took Jesus’ message to the Gentiles challenging the Jewish presumption of election. Paul even has Old Testament support for this radical move in Amos 9.7 ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?’ As Dunn quips, the verse is asking ‘what makes you so special?’

John the Baptist preached in the same vein, ‘Do not think to say among yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham’ (Matt. 3.9; Luke 3.8). The Baptist seems quite obviously to refer not to the Gentiles but rather to Muslims who claim descent from Ishmael.

As it turns out, Hellenist and Pauline Christianity won the day. The fortunes of the Hebrew Nazarenes waned especially with the Jewish revolt of 70 A.D. when they were forced to flee to Pella, the distancing from Jerusalem and the Temple creating a natural disorientation in them. They seem to have given way to Ebionite Christianity that held that Jesus was human and also held Peter and James in high esteem and regarded Paul an apostate. But the Ebionites were set back by the events of 130 A.D. All the while, Pauline Christianity proved to be a far stronger swimmer in the Greco-Roman world and gave way to proto-orthodox Christianity in the second century that would play the decisive role in defining Christian orthodoxy. But the methods through which proto-orthodox Christianity asserted its influence were based on religious zeal and passion rather than rational discourse. Their strongest weapons seem to have been their unity of belief, church, and community but then unity had precedence over historical truth. They produced a prolific literature, including heresiologies that maltreated rival groups (Gnostics, Marcionites, Ebionites) and fantastic accounts of martyrdoms (beasts and fire do not touch their bodies, a sign of divine favor). Christianity had come a long way from its early days in Jerusalem.

4. Conclusion

Judaism’s floundering in the face of extraordinary individuals did not end with the Nazarene Jesus. It was followed by another wholesale rejection this time of the Ishmaelite Muhammad. If Jesus was extraordinary, Muhammad was more so, for he succeeded in creating unprecedented spiritual, moral, and social advancement in his native Arabia and subsequently in the rest of the world. As a false prophet, Muhammad was even more dangerous, because he zealously proclaimed the unity of God to all of humankind. Never did a religion sound as Jewish in its basic doctrine and tenor as did Islam. To top it all, Islam was not above historical common sense and accepted the holiness of Jesus (and all the other Jewish prophets as well). And it went beyond that acceptance to arrive at a beautifully qualified position that was anachronistic to say the least. Islam blasted the Trinity and then embraced Jesus, but only as a prophet. While Judaism’s rejection of Christianity was wholesale and indiscriminate, Islam
wisely took from Christianity everything that is invaluable though defensible in it, namely, the concepts of the Father as God and the extraordinary person of Jesus as subordinate to God.

The conviction with which Islam blasted the Trinity and embraced Jesus is simply anachronistic. This happened in the early 7th century just over 200 years after Jesus had officially become God in the 4th century Christological councils. While the Arian Christians were also not willing to accept Jesus as God, they slumped into a spiritual crisis after the shattering defeat of their emperor Valens at the hands of the Visigoths in Thrace.230 The Arians were from the East and had greater affinity to coherence, logic, and clarity and in this sense to Greek philosophy.231 But it now seemed to them that maybe the Nicene Christians from the West had been right all along. It now seemed that if they had earlier accepted Jesus as God such devastating misfortune may not have befallen them. Life was harsh and brutish and men may be forgiven for capitulating on their rational intuitions. Thus, even the Arians never had the depth of conviction against Jesus’ divinity that Islam manifested in its early days and ever since. To be exact, what is anachronistic in the Islamic stance is the bulls-eye assault on the Trinity rather than on false targets such as Jesus or Christianity. Judaism never hit the bulls-eye because although it lambasted the Trinity it indiscriminately opened fire on Jesus as well. Arianism never hit the bulls-eye because while it embraced Jesus as uniquely holy it eventually succumbed to the Trinity. Islam gets the balance just right and with supreme conviction. Jesus is embraced but the Trinity is ripped apart. It is this balance that neither Judaism nor Arianism ever came close to attaining. From a bird’s eye view (and this is all we can afford in this thesis), Islam’s conviction on this matter gives us our first indication of the logic, simplicity, and common sense of this religion. This motivates our study of Islamic hermeneutics in the next chapter all the while remaining faithful to the rational psychology of perfect being theology.

The wall that Judaism built around itself to exclude historical figures that were unassailably extraordinary has, as I have explained, deeply problematic roots in human psychology. One arrives at Jewish faith through an act of trust in the Jewish prophets and their scriptures, but above all through an act of trust in Yahweh. A Jewish person of faith must trust Yahweh when he says that he is Almighty God. This is because a being of that power could easily have deceived each of the prophets, and so trusting the prophets and their scriptures is not anywhere near enough to arrive at faith in Yahweh as God. The point is that to attain faith in Yahweh it is necessary for the river of emotion to flow freely, the emotion in question being trust. But the problem is that once the river is flowing there is really no natural way to stop it. Thus, when Jesus comes along and says that the Father sent him, there is nothing a faithful Jew can do but trust him and the Father. This is because for a true Jewish believer there is already a deep and powerful current in the river of trust and also because Jesus is so worthy of trust. Of course, there could be distortions in Jesus’ message produced by mischief mongers and misguided folks, but there is always some noise in any system, and that noise always has to be ignored in order to focus on the focal point. That focal point is the unquestionable sincerity of Jesus’ mission. In failing to accept Jesus as, at least, a prophet, the Jews break all bounds of decency in religious psychology. They have by some unnatural means dammed the river of trust. Then when Muhammad comes along, the psychological situation is already in disastrous shape. But if a man such as Muhammad fails to break that dam and the waters of trust don’t flow once again when they see him then we have a psychological problem on our hands that seems to be beyond redemption. The rabbis at the forefront of the decision to turn their backs on Jesus and Muhammad must bear the full weight of this devastating criticism.232
In this appendix, we analyzed a couple of important examples of psychological principles disciplining theistic beliefs, and in Chapter 1: Section 5 and chapters 2 and 3 we see examples of the very same principles disciplining hermeneutical practices. The problem for Judeo-Christian theists is that they want to be card carrying members of a relatively narrow discourse community, namely, the community of rational theists. By theists, I mean folks who believe in an intelligent God who is the necessary first cause of the universe. By rational theists, I mean folks who believe that their belief in such a God is rational and who must therefore claim to have reasons for believing in an intelligent necessary first cause. The problem begins when we realize that the deepest reasons for belief in such a God are supplied by the deep psychology of simplicity, logic, sufficient reason, and trust. Because these principles rationally ground the Judeo-Christian belief in God there is a problem when they clash with central tenets of Judeo-Christian theism. For Christian theism, deep psychology clashes with the Trinity and I believe that the former must eventually succeed in ousting the latter in order to preserve the consistency and thus the rationality of the overall belief system. For Jewish theism, deep psychology clashes with the rejection of Jesus and Muhammad and God’s (permanent) election of Israel, and here also I believe that the former must eventually oust the latter for the sake of the consistency and rationality of the overall belief system. It is harder to find a significant clash of deep psychology with Islamic theism but this is not to say that Islamic belief systems are not in need of psychological discipline. Muslim interpreters of the original sources of Islam (Quran and Sunna) have not engaged in philosophy of religion in a way so as to systematically articulate the psychological principles that gave them their theistic Muslim identity. As a result, the principles they apply to their interpretation of the original sources deviate from those that are the basis of their religious and philosophical identity. Like their Judeo-Christian brethren, Muslims theists also want to be members of a narrow discourse community, namely, the community of rational Muslim theists. Of course, they cannot obtain such membership if their overall belief system is inconsistent and irrational. So there is a critical role for deep psychology in disciplining Islamic hermeneutics.

3 In the introduction to his Apocalypse, John says: ‘[Jesus] made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father’ (Revelation 1.6) [italics added]. So the Father is his (Jesus’) God. Peter exclaims ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!’ (1 Peter 1.3) [italics added]. So the Father is the God of Jesus. For Jesus, the ‘Kingdom of God’ (Matthew 21.31) is also ‘my Father’s kingdom’ (26.29). He is the ‘Son of God’ and God is his Father. But God is also the Father of other Christians as is apparent from James use of the phrase ‘God our Father’ (James 1.27, NIV, NJB).
5 Feser, “Swinburne’s Tritheism”, p. 182
7 The Filioque controversy that created the great schism between Western and Eastern churches came much later in 589 A.D. and was on a relatively minor issue (in the scheme of things), namely, the Western churches made an addition to the Nicene-Constantinople creed that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son.
8 For a lucid sociopolitical history of these 4th century developments see Rubenstein, When Jesus Became God.
11 Tuggy, “Divine Deception”, p. 276 (footnote 11). See Murray Harris Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1992) who makes a compelling case that theos almost always refers to the Father throughout the New Testament (40-50). Harris shows (49, 271-272) that there are only six verses where theos can ‘certainly’ or ‘very probably’ be read as applying to Christ.
14 Richard Swinburne has offered a poor argument for the case that there are a priori grounds for believing in 3 divine persons. There is no need to mention this argument here though it is briefly alluded to in the Introduction. See his Christian God. See also Clark, Kelly James, “Trinity or Tritheism?”, Religious Studies, Vol. 32, No. 4, Dec. 1996, pp. 463-76.
15 Clark, “Trinity or Tritheism?”, p. 463
17 Swinburne, Christian God, pp. 147-8. See also Clark, “Trinity or Tritheism?”, p. 466
18 Clark, “Trinity or Tritheism?”, p. 474-5.
19 Rubenstein, When Jesus Became God, pp. 216-7. The following is Rubenstein’s description of the immediate aftermath of the battle between Valens, the Arian Emperor of the East, and the Visigoths: ‘In August 378 the remnants of the divisions sent to reinforce Valens arrived in the field outside Hadrianapolis, where they had been told a great battle between the Visigoths and Romans was in progress. None who saw it would ever forget the sight of that field. The battle had been over for several days. Rotting corpses spread like a seething carpet across the fertile land. Although the dead men’s weapons and standards had been taken and many of their uniforms stripped as well, it was clear that virtually all the casualties were soldiers of the Roman army. There were no Gothic corpses, no sign of the emperor or his court, no indication that any Roman, Latin, or Greek, remained alive. It was as if the empire itself had suddenly ceased to exist.’
20 For an account of this history see Rubenstein, When Jesus Became God.
22 While it is true that Islam does not accept as prophets the founders of, for example, the Baha’i and Ahmedi faiths, this is primarily because they came after Muhammad who is trusted in his saying that he is the last of the prophets. In any case, it would be historically undiscerning of us to place individuals such as the founders of those later faiths in the same category as historical figures of the stature of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. I thank Robert Gleave for raising the issue of claimants to prophetic authority after Muhammad.
24 He also ardently read the works of another Neoplatonist, Porphyry.
26 Ibid., p. 262
27 Ibid., pp. 262-3
28 Ibid., pp. 264-5
29 Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 80-3, 99
30 Ibid, pp. 71. ‘This order excludes not only temporal intervals in between the existence of the persons, but also any kind of ‘priority’ of a person or procession in relation to another. St. Thomas puts this very strongly: ‘The Father has no priority in relation to the Son: neither in duration, nor in nature, nor conceptually, nor in dignity... There is no priority whatsoever of one person over another in God’ (Aquinas, I Sentences d. 9, q. 2, a. 1; d. 12, q. 1, a. 1).
31 Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 21-3, 25-31, 33-5, 79
32 Augustine, De Trinitate V.V.6 (BA 15, pp. 432-5) as cited in Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 82
34 Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 90
35 Ibid, p. 94
36 Ibid, p. 90
37 Ibid, p. 115
38 Ibid, pp. 118-27
39 Ibid, pp. 95, 117, 121
40 For some build up to this final solution see Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 93-9
41 Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 121: ‘Thus, the relative properties are really identical to the divine person... Another way of putting it is that relative property and person designate the same reality, even though their mode of signifying it differs.’
42 Ibid, p. 121: ‘Because of this theory of subsistent relations, Thomas can stake two claims on behalf of divine simplicity. The first is that all the divine attributes are really identical to the very essence of God. Since there does not exist within God a collection of this, that and the other, there is no genuine difference between God’s goodness, his power, and his essence. The second is that... relative properties are really identical to the divine person’. As God’s attributes and properties are identical to his essence, the question posed in the main text is: why are these attributes and properties not identical to each other?
43 Thomas may respond to the question posed in the text and at the end of the previous endnote by saying that while attributes and properties designate the same reality their mode of signifying this reality differs. But if paternity and filiation designate the same reality (in different ways), then Thomas must get his knickers in a twist because paternity cannot fail to designate the Son and filiation cannot fail to designate the Father (as Father and Son are the same essential reality). At least the final fatal objection must stand, viz., if paternity can designate both Father and Son then these two divine persons must be the same self-conscious being (Sabellian heresy).
44 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q. 40, a. 1, ad 1 as cited in Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 121 including footnote 94: ‘... the relation of spiration is really identical to the persons of the Father and the Son’.
45 Emery, St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 95, 117, 121
46 In this section, I have benefited from discussions with Huda Syed on her readings on various historians.
48 Ibid, pp. 30-1
49 Ibid, p. 31
50 Ibid, p. 31
51 Ibid, p. 31
52 Wright, Thomas N., Jesus and the Victory of God, London: SPCK, 1996, p. 17
53 Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 35
54 Ibid, p. 36
55 Ibid, pp. 35-6 & 38
56 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 16
57 Ibid, p. 17
58 Ibid
59 Ibid
60 Ibid, p. 18
61 Ibid. Strauss was deeply influenced by Hegel’s views and admitted that Hegelian philosophy was “the ultimate point of departure” of his “Cosmic Conception,” (Martin, Elusive Messiah, pp. 37, 39).
62 Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 37
63 Ibid, p. 38
64 Ibid, pp. 37-8
65 Ibid, pp. 83
66 Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, Chapter 2; Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 45
67 See Griffiths, John Gwyn, Triads and Trinity, University of Wales Press, 1900. The publisher’s note says: ‘Was the idea of the Trinity - that One God exists in Three Persons and One Substance - influenced by pre-Christian traditions? It is well known that the New Testament offers no such doctrine, and there is no evidence that Jesus of Nazareth regarded himself as a member of the Trinity. The doctrine was developed during the first four Christian centuries, culminating in the Council of Constantinople in AD 381. The world of the early Christian centuries in which the Trinity was developed as a tenet of belief included several religious and philosophical systems with similar beliefs. Triads and Trinity examines three possible areas of impact: Judaism, the religion of Egypt, and various Greek traditions. Whereas a
pluralistic concept of God was inherited by Judaism, it eventually accepted a firm monotheism. In Egypt the concept of trinity was of ancient origin, but it flourished especially in the second century AD and afterwards, when the mystery cult of Isis reached its acme of popularity in a Graeco-Egyptian framework which found adherents in many countries of the Roman empire. This Graeco-Egyptian religious amalgam exercised a potent influence on early Christian thinkers, particularly in Alexandria. Using the methods of comparative religion, the distinguished Classicist and Egyptologist J. Gwyn Griffiths has examined the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity and has based his conclusions on a thorough analysis of the original sources in Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Coptic and Hebrew. We could usefully add that the most likely possible sources of the Christian tri-unity are the popular Egyptian cult of Isis with Osiris and Horus (mother, father, and child) or the three hypostases of Neoplatonism given that it could not be a total coincidence that three hypostases are the basic principle of the Nicean-Constantinople creed.

http://www.kingdavid8.com/Copycat/JesusDionysus.html


Griffiths, Triads and Trinity, p. 11

Ibid

www.larrgavisbrown.homestead.com/Aristotle_Tragedy.html


Ibid

Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 51

Ibid, pp. 50, 54

Ibid, p. 53

Ibid, p. 54

Ibid, p. 54

Ibid, p. 57

Ibid, p. 58

Ibid, pp. 59-60: ‘He considered his mission as having overriding importance, and he thought that how people responded to him was more important than their other duties... Sanders’s own favorite term for Jesus’ conception of himself is “vicerey,” which means that although God is king, Jesus represents him and will continue to represent him in the coming kingdom’.

Ibid, p. 51

Ibid, p. 52

Ibid

Ibid, p. 56

Ibid

Ibid

Ibid, p. 53

Ibid, p. 58


Martin, Elusive Messiah, pp. 99-100

Ibid, p. 106


Ibid, as cited in Martin, Elusive Messiah, pp. 105-6

Ibid, pp. 11, 788 as cited in Martin, Elusive Messiah, pp. 105-6

Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 62

Ibid, p. 62

Ibid

Ibid, pp. 107-8

Ibid, pp. 62-3

Ibid, pp. 49-50

Ibid, p. 49

Ibid, p. 67

Ibid, p. 115

Ibid

Ibid, p. 61

Ibid, p. 112

sunbathing or members

The Alexander

Ibid., Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 45

Martin, Elusive Messiah, p. 86: '[The Cynics] were also famous for reducing their personal needs to the bare minimum. In a classic story told by Cicero, Alexander the Great once asked Diogenes, who was sunbathing at the time, to name anything he wanted and it would be granted. Diogenes asked Alexander to step to one side, so as not to block the sun'.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 150

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 147

Ibid., p. 151-2

Ibid., p. 153

Ibid., p. 155

Ibid., p. 155-6

Ibid., p. 158

Sanders, Historical Figure, pp. 13 & 224


Ibid., p. 138

Ibid., pp. 137-9

Ibid., p. 139

Ibid., p. 138

Ibid., pp. 138-9

Ibid., p. 135: 'The issue, however, has to be seen much more in terms of covenantal nomism – law-keeping as an expression of covenant status, of covenant membership – law keeping as what covenant members needed to do in order to affirm and maintain their status within the covenant people of God. The issue as it came to the fore at the time of Jesus, as we shall see, was not merely about points of law, or of ethical decision, but about how Jews should live as being the people of God, about what walking (halakah) according to God’s statutes involved. The result was, as we shall also see, considerable factional dispute – and, more important, an effective dis- covenanting by each faction of those who disagreed with its halakah.'

Ibid., pp. 139-40

Ibid., p. 140

Ibid.

Ibid., (footnote 32)

Ibid., p. 54

Of course, I don’t think we should assume that the disciples were eating with dirty hands, only they were not ritually washed. Jesus would naturally mean that while outward purity ought to be observed, it should not cause one to lose sight of inward purity because that is what really matters.

Dunn, Partings, p. 142.

Ibid., p. 51

Ibid., p. 52

Quoted in Dunn, Partings, p. 147
that unexplained reacted crowd. eager respond Testament, was coherent excluded to were thousand…

Ibid: ‘He was protesting against an understanding and practice of God’s covenant grace which excluded other Jews by drawing such boundaries and by drawing them too tightly. He was protesting against what he must have perceived as an attempt to corner for themselves the covenant grace of God, to monopolize the covenant righteousness of the Lord God. Alternatively expressed, he was attempting to restore the wholeness of Israel… It was not the law or law as a principle which Jesus called into question. It was the law understood in a factional or sectarian way – interpreted in narrowing terms so that those who could not accept, or who would not conform, or who challenged that interpretation, were ipso facto categorized as ‘sinners’, even though they were Jews themselves and willing or indeed eager to live within the covenant as they understood it.’

Sanders, Historical Figure, p. 223-4

Dunn, Partings, p. 133

In this section, I have benefited from discussions with Moign Khwaja on his readings on Paul and the Synoptics.

http://strongsnumbers.com/hebrew/4886.htm

Wright, Thomas, N., Paul, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009, p. 43

Ibid


Wright, Paul, pp. 45, 48

Ibid, pp. 45-7

Ibid, p. 46

Ibid, p. 48

Vermes, Jesus: Nativity, Passion, Resurrection, p. 397

Ibid p. 396

Ibid p. 393

Ibid, p. 394

Ibid, pp. 414

Ibid, pp. 418-20


Vermes, Jesus: Nativity, Passion, Resurrection, pp. 419-20


The paragraph in the main text is a brief summary of Sanders, Historical Figure, pp. 58-60

Sanders, Historical Figure, p. 60


Sanders, Historical Figure, p. 60

The paragraph in the main text comprises points taken from Sanders, Historical Figure, pp. 63-6

Sanders, Historical Figure, p. 65

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 70

The paragraph in the main text comprises points taken from Sanders, Historical Figure, pp. 69-72

Sanders, Historical Figure, p. 70

Ibid., p. 72

Dunn, Partings, pp. 221-3. Dunn: ‘The rather surprising feature of our records is that Jesus did not respond positively to the role of Messiah. He apparently did not warm to the idea of being the royal son of David. This becomes clear from the same three episodes reviewed above. (1) In the feeding of the five thousand… According to Mark 6.45 Jesus ‘compelled’ his disciples to embark on the lake when it was already evening, before dismissing the crowd. The odd choice of language and order of events is left unexplained in Mark but becomes clear in the light of John 6.15. The picture indeed becomes fully coherent if we simply infer that Jesus’ disciples were also caught up in the messianic fervor of the crowd. The only way to handle the dangerous situation was to detach the disciples from the crowd and to dispatch them onto the lake, even though the evening wind was likely to be against them. Only then was Jesus able to dismiss the crowd… If this reconstruction is at all accurate, then the point is that Jesus reacted against the popular role being offered to him. Presumably he saw it as a false understanding of his mission… The point for us, however, is that Jesus rejected the role of royal Messiah thus thrust at him. (2) A similar conclusion comes from a closer look at the account of Peter’s confession. In the
earliest account (Mark) Jesus replies to the confession by forbidding his disciples to speak to anyone about him (Mark 8.30). This is not a refusal of the confession and the role it implied. But neither is it a word of welcome... Mark 8.30 is neither a rebuke, nor a word of congratulation. Given the sustained emphasis in Mark on the disciples' dullness, the implication is that Peter's understanding of Jesus as Messiah was inadequate and misleading – not much different, in fact, from that of the Galilean crowd in the feeding episode. That would be why a command to silence was appropriate: such a view was not to be encouraged. Instead, according to all three Synoptic evangelists, Jesus began at once to describe what his mission really involved – suffering, rejection and death (Mark 8.31 pars.). The implication is, once again, that 'messiah' as popularly understood (as also by the disciples) was not a suitable vehicle for Jesus' self-understanding.' The third episode Dunn refers to is the questioning of Jesus at his trial and before Pilate and this is discussed later in the main text.

This is the same as the third episode referred to in the previous endnote and discussed later in the main text.


Ibid., pp. 225-6

See the last few sentences of endnote 191.

Dunn, *Partings*, p. 68

Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 269

Ibid., pp. 252-3

The Sanhedrin was the 'highest Jewish authority in Palestine prior to A.D. 70. This court, composed of 70 members and the high priest as president, had complete control over the religious affairs of Israel and had the final say-so in the interpretation of Mosaic Law. It also governed civil affairs and tried certain criminal cases under the authority of the Romans; it could not, however, impose capital punishment (John 18.31).’ Taken from Jean E. Syswerda (ed.), *Women of Faith Study Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, p. 2103.

Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 265

Ibid.

Ibid., pp. 268-9

Ibid., p. 269

Ibid., p. 268

Ibid., pp. 265-6

Ibid., p. 260

Ibid., p. 255

Ibid., p. 264

Dunn, *Partings*, pp. 233-4. It is quite possible that God answered his distressed prayer at the Mount of Olives. The disciples Peter, James and John had a vision of him with the prophets Moses and Elijah.

Sanders:

... afterwards three of them (Peter, James and John) had a vision in which they saw him in glory with Moses and Elijah (Mark 9.2-13). According to the Bible, Elijah was taken bodily to heaven, and Jewish tradition often accorded the same honor to Moses. Jesus' presence with them in the disciples' vision testifies to high status indeed – again, not precisely 'son of David' or 'Messiah'. Both Elijah and Moses were prophets (Sanders, *Historical Figure*, pp. 242-3).

This is all the more interesting because more than six centuries later the Quran would claim that Jesus, though arrested and probably sent to the executioner, was never crucified but rather taken directly to heaven.

A third choice is obviously possible, namely, that they could have ignored Jesus and abandoned their responsibilities altogether thus losing their jobs but not having to follow Jesus. This option is a whole lot better than sending him to be executed.

Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 274

Dunn, *Partings*, p. 222

Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 271

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 273


Ibid., p. 223

Martin, *Elusive Messiah*, p. 69

267
Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 267  
Dunn, *Partings*, pp. 87-8  
Ibid., p. 88  
Ibid., pp. 89-90  
Ibid., p. 94, footnote 62  
Ibid., p. 91  
Ibid., p. 94, footnote 62  
Ibid., p. 94  
Ibid., pp. 100-3  
Ibid., p. 151  
Ibid., p. 179  
I am thankful to Robert Gleave (see endnote 22) for raising the objection that if one should trust Jesus and Muhammad then why stop there? Why not trust, for example, the founder of the Bahai faith? But I think the response to that is obvious. Jesus and Muhammad were extraordinary in a way that the founder of the Bahai faith was not. It would be historically undiscerning of us to put these three in the same boat.
Appendix 2

Interpreting the Sunna

1. What is Sunna?

Since much of this appendix is a discussion aimed at capturing the concept of Sunna in Islam and answering the question “What is Sunna?” it would be more appropriate for the title to read “Hermeneutics of the Sunna”. The word ‘hermeneutics’ captures a wider endeavor and conveys the fact that we are yet to determine the nature and scope of the text, in this case, the nature and scope of the Sunna. As far as the Quran is concerned, it is abundantly clear what text is being referred to, viz. the one that has 114 chapters and is accepted as Islam’s Holy Scripture by virtually all Muslims. With the Sunna we are bereft of the advantage of having a clearly defined text waiting to be interpreted. So while interpreting is a simpler word, it still made good sense to have hermeneutics in the title of this appendix. Obviously the case before us is one where something other than good sense has prevailed.

To find out what the Sunna is, let’s go back to the beginning of Islam. Muhammad made the claim that God had chosen him as prophet. Choosing prophets was already part of God’s sunna or practice and so the claim that God had chosen a prophet was not a novelty. It was not a new sunna or practice.¹ If there was anything new under the sun then it was that Muhammad was the prophet. The message that God sent with Muhammad was also not a new one. It conveyed the existence of one God, of His angels, and of life after death. It tied the fulfilment of basic spiritual and moral requirements with accountability in Heaven and Hell. Thus, Islam began life as a forceful restatement of the Abrahamic tradition, Muhammad (God’s messenger) and the Quran (God’s book) being the media for this restatement. As a restatement, Islam was not something new other than facts such as this time around the revelation came to Muhammad in Mecca where the language of the people was Arabic. While I have spoken of sunna, I have spoken of God’s sunna, and because God’s practice is not a model that man can follow this is not the Sunna that is our concern in this chapter.

God also legislated in the Quran during the more practical Medinese phase of Muhammad’s mission. Quranic legislation is a set of divine rules to be obeyed rather than a model of behavior or a normative practice to be followed. However, not all the things that are of importance can be found in the Quran and there are some important things that the Prophet did that are not mentioned within its pages. An obvious example is the manner in which he offered his five daily prayers. While the Quran enjoins believers to pray at the stated times it does not explain how to pray. According to an authentic tradition, the angel Gabriel taught Muhammad the prayers.² But of course if Gabriel taught him the prayers then this is not a sunna or practice that Muhammad came up with. Strictly speaking, it is not Muhammad’s sunna because he is merely a transmitter. Rather, Gabriel’s instruction would seem to be a supra-Quranic extension of divine revelation. In
other words, while such instruction is not found in the Quran it is not strictly Muhammad’s sunna either but seems rather to fall into no man’s land between Quranic commandment and Muhammad’s sunna. However, because God established that sunna through His prophet and not through His book, traditionally, the manner of offering prayers is seen to be part of the Prophetic sunna.

Keeping the prayer example in mind, I think it will be useful to have three categories: Quranic commandment, Gabriel/Prophetic sunna (God uses the Prophet to establish a practice), and Muhammad’s sunna (a strategy or practice Muhammad comes up with). As I have said, traditionally, the two latter categories are merged into one because they are both seen to be things that the Prophet used to do. But differentiating them is useful because with Gabriel/Prophetic sunna Muhammad is a mere transmitter while with Muhammad’s sunna he is a man creatively responding to the circumstances of his life, importantly keeping in mind that this was a man deeply touched by the divine. There are of course numerous examples of Muhammad acting on his own accord. For example, we have no reason to believe that sending some of the poorer and more persecuted Muslims to Abyssinia or later telling Muslims to migrate to Medina were anything other than Muhammad’s own decisions. In this way, he established a sunna of migration in circumstances of persecution and oppression. Or similarly, his invoking of brotherhood in Medina, asking each of the Ansar (helpers) of Medina to make a brother of and become host to a Muhajir (immigrant) from Mecca also seems to be Muhammad all the way. Other sunna bear witness to his fair-mindedness and diplomacy. While still a youth he resolved a dispute between tribes by creatively finding a way to include all of them in the honorary placing of the sacred stone in the Ka’ba, and he did this by asking one member from each tribe to hold the ends of a cloth that carried the stone to its resting place. Later in life, when many of the Medinese Muslims wanted to be host to him, he resolved the situation by allowing his camel to decide where he would stay. Who could possibly take offense at the decision of a camel? In the same vein, we can assume that his nightly vigils in prayer were a testament to his devotion to God and that he was not receiving specific instruction on such matters.

The examples adduced in the last paragraph are not innocuous and open up a critical issue regarding what constitutes Sunna. Muhammad was a man and in this way no different from his comrades Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and others. True, he was touched by the divine, but to a possibly lesser extent so were the people in his inner circle. Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and the others also testified to the truth of the divine message and gave their lives and properties in upholding this truth. The point is that when the people in Muhammad’s inner circle responded to their circumstances their response was not disconnected or dissimilar from that of Muhammad’s. It is well-known that when the Muslim armies conquered Egypt and Iraq during ‘Umar’s reign (634-44 A.D.), the second Caliph was under pressure to divide the conquered lands amongst the Muslim soldiery because this is what Muhammad used to do (Muhammad’s sunna). Of course, ‘Umar realized that the conquest of Egypt and Iraq was not quite the same as the conquest of an Arabian (desert) town, this being the context in which Muhammad would divide the booty as an
incentive for his fighters. The division of Egypt and Iraq amongst the soldiers would have resulted in one of the largest feudal systems ever known to man. Regardless of piety or general personal worth, the conquerors’ children would inherit whole fiefdoms from their fathers. ‘Umar saw the potentially disastrous consequences and declared that the conquered territories were state lands. It is difficult to imagine that Muhammad would have done things differently. This is why ‘Umar’s response is virtually indistinguishable from Muhammad’s. Had ‘Umar literally followed Muhammad’s *sunna* he would have divided the lands. But ‘Umar acted as an individual who had himself been touched by the divine. As such an individual he acted confidently on his sense of justice, his knowledge of human nature, and his intuitions about social progress. It would appear that Muhammad had trained his lieutenant to be creative in response to changing circumstances. The people in his inner circle were not robots or copycats or (and this is the real point of this appendix) blind literalists. To be sure, they often followed the Quran and the Prophet in a literal manner but not when there was sufficient reason not to. Their literalism had eyes because it was always on the lookout for that all-important sufficient reason that vetoed the literal interpretation.

A critical conclusion follows from the case discussed in the last paragraph. If we are to include Muhammad’s *sunna* in our sought after concept of Sunna then it cannot be included on its own without the *sunna* of ‘Umar. This is because the *sunna* of ‘Umar qualifies the *sunna* of Muhammad. Muhammad wanted to give an incentive to his fighters and this is why he divided the booty amongst them. But ‘Umar saw that when the conquered territories are vast the motives of social justice and progress must trump the motive of giving fighters an incentive. Without including ‘Umar’s insight we can hardly claim to have a complete view of what Muhammad was trying to achieve not only personally but also through his Companions. ‘Umar’s insight gives us a fuller view of Muhammad’s purposes and intentions. And of course this is really a fuller view of God’s purposes and intentions because it is God (interpreter is believer), not Muhammad, who is the founder of Islamic culture.

‘Umar’s example makes it clear that if we do not include his *sunna* in our concept of Sunna then our concept will be impoverished. In order to have a rich concept we have to see Muhammad as a person whose decisions lay the foundations for a legal culture that was then built upon by subsequent legists. We must not see him as a pan-legist who pronounced on every specific issue that the Muslims confronted and would confront in the future. Rather, Muhammad was the originator of a *fiqh* culture, and the task of the future development of that culture fell squarely upon his Companions’ shoulders. ‘Umar’s decisions are a development of the very same culture, namely, the culture of Islamic *fiqh*. The division of lands case is one of a multitude of cases through which ‘Umar and the other Caliphs and Companions developed and elaborated Islamic *fiqh*. Another prominent example from ‘Umar is the case of slave women that bore children to their masters. Because of the conquests, the numbers of such women had dramatically increased. Normally, after their masters’ death these slave women and their children would be inherited by the masters’ children. One senses that ‘Umar would have had a serious problem with masters’ children inheriting slaves regardless of personal effort or character. He ruled that
slave women and the children they bore their masters were to be free when the masters died. But if this is such a salutary ruling we may ask why Muhammad did not give it during his lifetime when there were obviously cases of slave women bearing children to their masters. The answer has to be that there was not a flood of such cases as ‘Umar experienced because of the sudden conquests. This corroborates the view that Muhammad was not a pan-legist who pronounced on every possible present or future issue. Most of the work was left for others to complete. Muhammad must have seen his work as laying the foundations of a fiqh culture that would respond creatively to new problems. He must have taught his followers to be always on the lookout for the sufficient reason that challenges past precedent.

The nature of history is such that new situations keep arising, and they did for the Companions of the Prophet. There was a time when the third Caliph, Uthman (644-56), had to decide to burn copies of the Quran in order to preserve one standard version. Muhammad had never confronted or predicted such a situation. There was also a time when the fourth Caliph, Ali (656-61), decided to engage in a civil war in order to uphold the principle that the Caliph of Islam and the Commander of the Faithful (ameer ul-momineen) should be the most God conscious (muttaqi) and just (ādil) person from among the believers. Needless to say that Muhammad never confronted a situation where he had to make war on believers. So times change, new situations arise, and fresh opinions are required to deal with them.6 This is the natural way in which a dynamic culture emerges.

Naturally, of course, this dynamism was not limited to the first four Caliphs and placing any such restriction would be arbitrary and groundless. It is a dynamism that infected most of the Companions of the Prophet who freely gave their opinion on all matters of Shari’a, both ritualistic and legal. As the home of the Prophet and thousands of his Companions and as the seat of the first four Caliphs, Medina was the foremost centre for the development of Shari’a.7 Among those who lived in that city were important Companions, such as Aisha (d. 57/676) and ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Umar (d. 692). In the generation following the Companions (the generation of the tabe’in or Successors), Aisha’s nephews, Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/712) and Qasim b. Muhammad (d. ca. 110/728), and Abu Hurayra’s son-in-law, Sa’id b. al-Musayyab (d. 94/712), were among the chief fuqaha in Medina, while legists also attended the study circle of ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Umar’s client Nafi (d. 118/736). Some of Medina’s other leading specialists were Sulayman b. Yasar (d. ca. 110/728), ‘Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (d. 86/705), and Rabi’a al-Ra’y (d. 136/753).8 Medinese fiqh is preserved in what is quite possibly the earliest extant work on that subject, namely, the Muwatta’ of Malik b. Anas (d. 179/795) written around 150/767.9 Malik was deeply embedded in the Medinese fiqh tradition as can be discerned from the fact that Nafi, Rabi’a al-Ra’y, and Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 124/742; a student of Sa’id b. al-Musayyab) were among his teachers.10 While the Quran was always a primary source of fiqh, the sunnas of Muhammad, the first four Caliphs and other leading Companions and Successors were further sources. Given the close relation of Malik’s generation to the sunnaic practice of thousands of Companions and Successors in Medina, it was sound logic for Malik to see the agreement or consensus (ijma) on a sunna in Medina as a reflection of the agreement of the Companions or Successors on that
sunna, and for this reason as a reflection of the Prophetic intent.11 Quite rightly, sunnaic consensual practice12 in Medina was a primary source of fiqh alongside the Quran, and only after these sources were exhausted would afaqih of Malik’s generation apply his own reasoning or discretionary opinion (ra’y). In order of priority, the sources of fiqh could be said to be the Quran, sunnaic consensual practice, and then ra’y.13 This is the fiqh methodology of Malik’s Muwatta’.

Other important centers of fiqh development were Kufa, Mecca, Basra, and Damascus, the fiqh heritage of Kufa being the most significant among these. Abdullah b. Ma’sud (d. 32/652), a Companion who had spent 20 years with the Prophet14, a man of ‘Umar’s generation, and one of the leading fuqaha among the Companions, was the chief Companion resident in Kufa. His student, Alqama b. Qays (d. 62/681) inherited his teaching post pillar at the main mosque in Kufa, a place that was later inherited by Alqama’s student, Ibrahim al-Nakha’i (d. 96/714).15 Among the chief fuqaha in Kufa was the Successor Sa’īd b. al-Jubayr (d. 95/713) who was a student of the Companions Ibn Abbas and Ibn ‘Umar, ‘Amir al-Sha’bi (d. 110/728) who was an expert on sunan madiya (precedents of leading men of the past)16, and Ibrahim al-Nakha’i and his student Hammad b. Abi Sulayman (d. 120/737).17 The latter’s student Abu Hanifa (d.150/767) was a famous faqih and extant works by his two main students Abu Yusuf (d. 182/798) and Muhammad al-Shaybani (d. 189/805) give us a comprehensive account of Kufan fiqh to the end of the 8th century. While Kufan, and in general Iraqi, sunnaic practice was not directly backed by Prophetic authority in the way that Medinese practice was, it must still be said to have had its roots in Prophetic authority usually through the practice of Companions who had migrated from the Hejaz to the garrison towns of southern Iraq. The lack of a direct link to the Prophet would seem to be the reason why Kufans relied somewhat more on Prophetic reports (hadith) than the Medinese did, but the sunna of Kufa was based in its own living tradition and there was not always felt need to identify it as Prophetic.18 However, the fiqh methodology was basically the same as in Medina. As a source of fiqh, regional consensus on sunna was seen as second only to the Quran. Ra’y was applied as a third source if the Quran and consensual sunnaic practice (of the region) did not offer explicit guidance. Such was also the case in Mecca, Basra, and Damascus as attested by the fiqh of Ata b. Abi Rabah (d. 115/733), Qatada b. Diama (d. 117/735), and al-Awzai (d. 157/774) respectively.

Ra’y was to be applied on the basis of knowledge of the Quran, knowledge of sunan madiya (past precedent) and consensual sunnaic practice (living tradition), and finally common sense and native wisdom (that is, an understanding of human nature, the demands of social justice and progress, and so on). Of course, as the years went by the database of sunnaic practice of various individuals and regions expanded, and soon became a specialized field of study. During the period 80-120 H. (ca. 700-35 A.D.) learning circles (halaqas) on fiqh matters emerged and prospered in the major centres.19 As many as forty students and scholars attended the halaqa of the Medinese faqih Rabi’a al-Ra’y.20 In Medina, Nafi mawla Ibn ‘Umar had his own circle of study in which prominent future legists participated and that was inherited by his student Malik b. Anas.21 Other fuqaha in Medina are said to have regularly discussed the legal issues of the day
that were also faced by Medinese judges in court. This group included Sa’id b. al-Musayyab, al-Qasim b. Muhammad, Kharija b. Zayd (d. 99/717), Sulayman b. Yasar, and Urwa b. al-Zubayr.22 Similarly, in Kufa, ‘Amir al-Sha’bi is said to have had an enormous halaqa as did Hammad b. Abi Sulayman.23 Fiqh had by this time become specialized to such an extent that judges and Caliphs routinely had to consult the fuqaha before giving their rulings.24

In the early centres of Medina, Kufa, Mecca, and Basra, the basic fiqh methodology did not vary. The Quran and (regional) sunnaic consensual practice were the primary sources of fiqh. If no precedent was found in these sources then the faqih would form a discretionary opinion or ra’y. Not surprisingly, there was a healthy diversity of opinions.25 Legal specialists could offer various opinions on the same issue and with the passage of time regional consensus (ijma’) would often emerge on a certain approach or opinion.26 For the first Islamic century, this was the fiqh culture of the major centres, and legal evolution during this period could be seen as somewhat analogous to biological evolution. The latter occurs through mutation and natural selection. Mutation offers a variety of survival strategies for organisms while natural selection hones in on one strategy. Somewhat analogously, the fuqaha would offer a variety of fiqh opinions and regional consensus (ijmāʿ) would often develop around only one of these.27 Islamic law was thus an open and dynamic system that was capable of adapting to changes in its environment (in a way that biological life also is).28 Soon, however, this very difference of opinion within and between the major centres was to be perceived as a weakness rather than strength of the system.

This is a good time to return to our basic question “What is Sunna?” We have seen that Sunna must include not only Muhammad’s sunna but also the sunna of the first four Caliphs and by extension the sunna of the Companions as well. But if the Companions are included because they are human beings touched by the divine and who are responding creatively to their circumstances, then we have no reason to exclude the Successors because much the same thing can be said of them. If the sunna of ‘Umar and his son ‘Abdullah b. ‘Umar can be included then so can the sunna of Nafi (ibn ‘Umar’s client or mawla) because all of these persons participated in the same ritualistic and legal (Shari’i) culture with its spiritual and moral underpinnings. In fact, the sunna of all upstanding early Muslims must be included in our sought after concept of Sunna, so long as the Shari’i culture established by Muhammad prevailed in the lands of Islam. We will soon see that it did not prevail for long, but for as long as it did we must accept that, as new situations arose, the Companions’ sunna qualified and elaborated Muhammad’s sunna, and the Successors’ sunna qualified and elaborated the Companions’ sunna, and so on. Thus, it is possible that some of Malik’s decisions in the Muwatta’ are part of our Sunna because if his teacher Nafi’s sunna can be included then so can his. By way of definition, Sunna could be said to be the normative practice of the early Muslim community that is embedded in the Shari’i culture established by Muhammad and the Quran.29 Of course, the practice being referred to (as Sunna) was normative in the context of that time and place and can be used as a second source of law (after the Quran) by drawing lessons from it for the construction of modern normative practice. If one of the early Muslims had written a comprehensive history of the ritualistic and
legal decisions of that period giving an adequate account of the background and context of those decisions, and if such a Shari‘i history had survived to our times, then that would logically be our second textual source of law after the Quran. I will fleetingly relate the tragic story of how it is rather the Sahihs of Bukhari and Muslim that became the second source of the Shari‘a, but an understanding of what the second source ought to be is beneficial as it leads us to give right importance to the extant works of fuqaha such as Malik, Abu Yusuf, and al-Shaybani.

2. The Hadith Movement

The reason that the fiqh culture that Muhammad established did not prevail for long is that it was overshadowed by a parallel fiqh culture that crystallized around a powerful movement. The hadith movement actually had very modest beginnings and began really as an attempt only to preserve one of the sources of fiqh rather than to be an all-embracing fiqh culture in its own right. It originated out of a concern that the sayings, deeds, and events of the Prophet’s life and the lives of his Companions were not being recorded and transmitted in a reliable way and that such reports (hadith or traditions) about the first Muslim generation were being fabricated on a large-scale thereby contaminating this all important source of the law. But let me tell the story from the beginning.

To be sure, hadith or traditions (sometimes also called sunān) about the Prophet or any other early personality are quite different from the sunna of that person in the sense that we are concerned with in this appendix. A hadith about a person is merely a factual report about one of their actions in the past. The word action is broadly understood to include choices, decisions, physical actions, strategies, approaches, responses, and omissions. A sunna, on the other hand, is a report complete with an analysis of the context and spirit in which a person acted (the sunna of a person is the way they respond to the circumstances of their life) and for this reason the sunna of an exemplary personality will often be normative. It is obvious that a person’s sunna could be derived from a hadith about him (as it could also be derived from the living tradition of those who follow him) and thus why the hadith is an important source for the Sunna (and thus for the Shari‘a). Remember that the concept of Sunna that I articulated in the previous section includes every (properly contextualized) action of the early Muslims that has normative value for us now.

The overshadowing of the early fiqh culture of Islam by the hadith movement would seem to have its origins in a traditionalist-literalist turn in Islamic culture. One of the themes in the Quran is that believers should follow the example of the Prophet. Now there are two ways to understand the Prophetic example. First, there can be a dynamic interpretation of Prophetic authority, so that the Prophet is seen to set an example for those around him who imbibe that example and act in the spirit of it. On this understanding, because the Prophet is a human being like those around him, he is not the only one who is touched by the divine or capable of issuing rules in a wise and just manner. He is not the only human medium between theology and law.
His Companions and the early Muslims are also stirred by the divine intervention and presence, and in their capacity as human beings touched by the divine, they can also issue rules that are wise and just. We saw in the last section that there is historical confirmation of this in the actions and decisions of the Companions and the early Muslims. Thus, the Prophet is seen as the founder of a fiqh culture that is then built upon by the early generations of Muslims. He was not a pan-legist who pronounced on every present or future issue but rather the founder of a fiqh culture that could respond creatively to new situations. In other words, most of the work of developing fiqh was left for others to complete. As we saw in the last section, this dynamic interpretation of Prophetic authority prevailed in the lands of Islam for all of its first century.

The second way to understand Prophetic authority is to have a static interpretation of it and to see the Prophet as setting an example for all times (and places). On this understanding, there is a tendency to see the Prophet as single-handedly establishing a more or less permanent system of basic fiqh, and as a pan-legist who pronounced on specific issues that the Muslims confronted and would confront in the future. This interpretation tends to devalue the roles of the people around the Prophet (i.e., his Companions) and of the early generations of Muslims, while amplifying the role of the Prophet and any historical reports of his actions (namely, hadith). A literalist (though non-contextual) reading of the Quran favours the second interpretation because the Quran does not literally ask believers to follow the example of the Companions or the early Muslims. This is why a literalist turn in Islamic culture would seem to be at the origins of a static culture that subsequently found expression in the powerful hadith movement. This literalist turn may (in turn) be explained by a general intellectual inertia and deterioration that is observed to erode cultural dynamism in declining civilizations, and this is really a traditionalist turn where tradition overshadows free intellectual endeavour. So it seems that to understand the rise of the hadith movement, we need to understand the growth of traditionalism in early Islam.

A question arises. How can I defend literalism (in Chapter 4) if it is one of the root causes of the success of the hadith movement? My answer is that while a literal reading of the Quran does tell us to follow the Prophetic example without explicitly including the Companions or the early Muslims in this directive, the case before us is one where, although the literal reading is the simpler one, there is sufficient reason not to interpret the text in this literal manner. The sufficient reason is that it is quite obvious both from common sense and history that the Companions and the early Muslims did imbibe the Prophetic example thus imbuing their actions with a reflection of the Prophetic intent. Thus, the actions of the early generations of Muslims give us a fuller view of the Prophet’s purposes and intentions, and, of course, this is really a fuller view of God’s purposes and intentions because it is God, not the Prophet, who is the founder of Islamic culture (interpreter is believer). As the static interpretation devalues the contribution of the early Muslims to Islamic fiqh, it ends up with an impoverished view of the intentions and purposes of God and the Prophet. For this reason, its concept of Sunna is impoverished.
At this point, I can clearly state the aims of this appendix. The example of Prophetic authority just discussed gives us an insight into a critical distinction that must generally be made between a blind literalism that is not responsive to sufficient reasons and a literalism-with-eyes that is. In the example above, blind literalism gave us a static interpretation of Prophetic authority because of its inability to see that there are sufficient reasons to go with a non-literal understanding. Blind literalism was historically exemplified by the hadith movement discussed in detail below, while the literalism-with-eyes was exemplified by the dynamic fiqh culture of the first Islamic century discussed in the last section. The latter literalism is basically the one that I advanced in Chapter 4 and for which I offered philosophical foundations in Chapter 1. This appendix attempts to use the historical record to open our eyes to the fact that it is not literalism per se that is the problem but rather a literalism that becomes mired and bound in tradition so that it loses the ability to respond to sufficient reasons in the form of changing circumstances. Traditionalism is the real enemy because it tends to have a sedating influence on people that takes away their ability to keep a lookout for that all-important sufficient reason (or set of reasons) that demands a timely response. So we will see that literalism can come to be blindfolded or blinkered by a sedating traditionalism that indiscernibly creeps upon unsuspecting individuals, communities, and civilizations. In contrast to this, a literalism-with-eyes is aware both of a creeping traditionalism and of the sufficient reasons embodied in changing geographical, socio-political, and technological circumstances.

The Rise of Hadith
The weight of evidence indicates that the Prophet was sensitive to the possibility that reports (hadith) about him could contaminate the transmission of the Quran (hadith would be confused with Quran and vice versa) or even compete against the Quran as an authoritative text.31 He also seemed to be sensitive to the possibility that hadith transmission would be inaccurate. It would seem that for these reasons he was very selective about which of his Companions should record his words and deeds in writing, even to the extent of imposing a general ban on writing hadith.32 The Prophet seems to have struck a balance between indiscriminate transmission and no transmission at all by not allowing everyone, but still allowing some people, to write about his life and mission.33 Giving permission to a select group of capable individuals was naturally a strategy aimed at achieving accurate transmission.34 For the first half of the first Islamic century, in harmony with the Prophet’s wishes, there remained a general prohibition on the oral transmission of hadith while the general prohibition on written transmission remained in force for at least the whole first century.35 Thus, at least for Islam’s first half century, hadith transmission was not allowed to progress towards becoming a formal or professional discipline in contrast, for example, to Quranic exegesis (tafseer) or law (fiqh).

The Prophet’s stance on hadith transmission is reflected in the decisions and actions of the Caliphs to control transmission. The second Caliph, ‘Umar, thought considerably about writing down the sunan36 of the Prophet but finally decided against the project. In one version, he explained his decision in the following manner: “I was intending to put in writing the Hadith, but
then the thought came to me of the people who lived before you [i.e. Jews, Christians, etc.] and who wrote books and grew to be so deeply engrossed in them that they abandoned and neglected even the book of God. By God! I on my part shall never mix up anything with the Book of God". In another version, Qasim b. Muhammad (d. 107, Medina) relates that when (written) tradition proliferated in 'Umar's time, he told the people to bring them to him and had them burnt saying "A Matnah [referring to what we know as the Mishnah] like the Matnah of the people of the Book!". It seems that 'Umar was really wary of the possibility that the book of God could be challenged by a competing authoritative text based on hadith. 'Umar was wary of the hadith transmission activity of some of the Companions and on one occasion detained Abu Darda, Ibn Mas'ud, and Abu Dharr in Medina because of their efforts to disseminate hadith. He similarly threatened to banish Abu Hurayra to the territory of Daus if the latter continued to transmit large numbers of hadith. After 'Umar's death, when Abu Hurayra transmitted hadith he commented that the second Caliph would have severed his head for transmitting such material. 'Umar is said to have enjoined that hadith transmission be limited to traditions related to ritual observance. In the same vein, the first Caliph Abu Bakr, ordered his collection of five hundred utterances to be burned. The reason he gave was that he feared that the collection may contain mistakes that may then be transmitted on his authority. Thus, beyond preserving the integrity of the Quran and its unique authoritative status (these being 'Umar's rationale for controlling transmission), a third reason for the restriction on hadith transmission was the fear that inaccuracies and falsehoods would find their way into the hadith material. There was fear that if the traditions are written they could fall into the wrong hands or amongst people without authority who would then feel qualified to transmit. This could lead to distortions and thus grave consequences.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the period immediately following the Prophet was not one of free hadith transmission. None of the Companions became professional scholars of hadith (later called muhaddithūn). There may have been teaching circles for explaining the meaning of the Quran (tafseer) and such explanations may have required knowledge of Prophetic traditions, but the study and transmission of such traditions was not an independent discipline. In the early period there was a social stigma and political risk involved in transmitting traditions and the transmission of hadith would not become a professional and publicly taught discipline until the period of the Successors and thereafter. We get a sense of the antagonism towards transmission even 50 years after the Prophet’s death from a telling incident that occurred in the caliphate of Yazid b. Mu'awiya (680-85). Shahr b. Haushab reports that he met Nauf al-Bikali and 'Abdallah b.'Amr b. al-As during his journey to Syria. When Nauf requested 'Abdallah, in the latter's status as Companion, to transmit hadith the reply was "These umara [political leaders] prevented us from transmitting hadith". When, Nauf persisted, 'Abdallah agreed to relate to those present an apocalyptic tradition concerning the Dajjal (antichrist). This event, near the end of 'Abdallah's life (d. ca. 70/684), reveals that opposition to hadith transmission had persisted in the ruling class ever since 'Umar’s time. Thus, not only was early Muslim orthodoxy against hadith transmission, their opposition had contributed to an enduring
culture of stigmatizing the activity of transmitters. This is a far cry from the generation of the
Successors who had begun to gain the freedom to become professional teachers of hadith.

The journey to freedom in hadith transmission is still not understood very well but the greatest
impetus towards freedom seems to have come from a fear in the Muslim community, its
leaders, and scholars, that vast numbers of hadith were being fabricated in the newer lands of
Islam (parts of Iraq and Khurasan). It will be useful to take a look at some of the milestones on
this journey to freedom. The major force of change is socio-political disruption (fitna). The first
fitna in Islam (656-661) involved the assassination of the third Caliph, Uthman, and an ensuing
civil war. This fitna came at a time when the Companions were still in their heyday and they had
the critical role to play in choosing sides or remaining neutral. Tensions and emotions ran sky
high but with the Prophet’s Companions still in charge this does not seem to be the time when
large numbers of hadith were fabricated. The reasons are that the Companions were still
perceived as the upholders of Islamic orthodoxy and so times were not yet ripe for the emerging
factionalism to produce ideology and practice on the basis of fabricated hadith. The second fitna
(680-92) is a far more plausible candidate for the beginnings of large-scale fabrication.\(^{47}\) By this
time, the generation of Companions had given way to the Successors naturally diminishing the
immediacy of the peoples’ connection with their Prophet. Further, the separation of religious
and political authority had become established, religious authority being naturally conferred on
the Successors to the Companions in the Hejaz and political authority essentially usurped by the
Umayyad dynasty in Damascus. Factional divisions (the largest faction being the Shiites) that
emerged from the first fitna had become more firmly rooted. The passing of the Companions,
the loss of political power of their spiritual successors in the Hejaz with the result that religious
authority became decentralized, and the increasing (but divisive) strength of political and
religious factions were conditions that made large-scale fabrication possible.\(^{48}\)

Because of large-scale fabrication\(^ {49}\), the fitna became the cause of a new awareness in the
community, its leaders, and scholars, that greater formalism (checks and balances) must be
introduced in the hadith transmission process. This formalism could be attained in two obvious
ways. One was that each transmitter must give chains of authority (isnād) for the hadith he
transmits, a chain ideally going all the way back to the Prophet and thereby authentically
grounding each tradition. The other was to end the taboo on oral transmission of hadith\(^ {50}\) so
that authentic hadith could be formally taught and disseminated through proper channels thus
challenging the flow of inauthentic hadith into public discourse. To recap, the fitna created a
pressure for greater formalism in hadith transmission and this was really a pressure to demand
the isnād and to formally teach and (orally) disseminate hadith. The fitna gave the community
the necessary incentive to introduce this formalism. Critically, it caused the ban on (oral)
transmission to be overthrown in that it gave the community, its leaders, and scholars, an
incentive to make hadith an independent discipline that is formally taught.

A parallel development that emerged between the first and the second fitna was the great
interest that Umayyad rulers beginning with Mu’awiyah (40-60/660-80) always showed in hadith

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scholarship. The Caliph 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (65-86/685-705) was himself a legal specialist from Medina and patron of the religious sciences and especially hadith transmission. On the advice of the Basran scholar Qatada b. Diama, he invited the young Medinese faqih and hadith scholar, Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, to his court. He persuaded Zuhri to expand his source material and go beyond his Quraysh sources and collect hadith from the knowledgeable Ansar as well. At this time, the second fitna was already running its course and 'Abd al-Malik and Zuhri were becoming increasingly aware that political factions, heterodoxies and other factors were contributing to the fabrication of hadith material especially in Iraq and Khurasan. Zuhri witnessed the Caliph urging the public to make efforts to spread the religious knowledge that they had before such time as death would overcome all the Companions of the Prophet. Thus it appears that it was always a matter of common sense that the sunān of the Prophet could be lost if it is not set down in writing and published. The two Caliphs that followed after 'Abd al-Malik were similarly devoted to the preservation of sunān. These were his sons Walid I (86-96/705-15) and Sulayman b. 'Abd al-Malik (96-9/715-7). Sulayman named the famous 'Umar II ('Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (99-101/717-9)) as his successor and 'Umar II became preoccupied with the preservation of the Sunān. He is said to have done for the Sunān what Uthman accomplished for the Quran, namely, its written publication.

'Umar II sent orders to the families of the caliphs Abu Bakr, 'Umar I, and 'Ali, and the Companions Anas b. Malik and 'Abdullah b. al-'As for historical records of the hadith and other state documents issued by the Prophet and his successors. In one version, 'Umar II wrote to a governor to the following effect: "Look for what concerns the Hadith of the Messenger of God, and write it out, for I fear the extinguishing of the knowledge and disappearance of those who know... In fact the knowledge will never be destroyed unless if it is kept secret." Zuhri was in charge of studying and coordinating the documents received. During the reign of Hisham b. 'Abd al-Malik (105-25/724-42) Zuhri remained free to follow his scholarly objectives. Both he and the Caliph continued to be concerned for the preservation of the Sunān. For Zuhri, patronage of the caliphs had made possible an illustrious scholarly career and copies of his collections were made for the court library. When Zuhri's works were removed from the court library by Hisham's vengeful successor Walid II, the forty years of Zuhri scholarship consisted of several loads of manuscripts as witnessed by Zuhri's famous student Ma'mar b. Rashid.

Over the course of his life, Zuhri appears to have gone from being an oral transmitter to a champion of hadith codification. He and his pupils became known as "the people of the books" and he 'considered attendance at a scholarly session without one's manuscripts a professional weakness'. At times he would hand 'his copy to a trusted pupil for copying or collation with permission (ijāzah) to transmit the content on his authority'. But Zuhri had not always been a proponent of writing. He is famously reported to have said "We were reluctant to set the knowledge (i.e. the tradition) down in writing until these rulers forced us to do so. Now we are of the opinion that no Muslim should be forbidden to do it (i.e. putting tradition in writing)." Zuhri may have been plagued by scruples all his life having become the link between an oral past and a literary future. He had 'adhered to the decades-old consensus' that only the Quran
should be officially edited, not hadith. Zuhri is the one who disseminated the tradition which tells of 'Umar abandoning his plan to codify the Sunan. Zuhri also seems to have been concerned in his capacity as tutor to Hisham's sons with having to write for the sons of Hisham. He is reported to have said "The rulers made me write [the tradition down]. Then I made them (i.e. the rulers' princes) copy it. Now that the rulers have written it (i.e. the tradition), I am ashamed that I do not write it for anyone else but them." Zuhri sees a contradiction in writing the tradition only for the princes and this seems to lead him to abandon his (and the prevailing) oralist values and write for everyone. This internally consistent though radical stance must soon have permeated Zuhri's immediate circle and Syrian scholarship in general. A student of Zuhri reports "We were not intending to write down from al-Zuhri, until Hisham forced him. Then he wrote for his sons. And now people write hadith." Zuhri was not unsympathetic to the Caliphs' reasons for demanding the tradition be written. He was aware that the grave threat posed by hadith fabrication had to be met by authentic redaction. He said "If it were not for hadith from the East coming to us and which we reject and do not know, I would never have written down hadith and I would not have allowed to have it written down."  

Zuhri's position seems to have evolved into a fully consistent one. He appears also to have broken the taboo against transmitting hadith through the Bedouins because of their lack of refinement and culture. Zuhri is said to have visited their dwellings many times to teach them hadith. Here again Zuhri seems to be a pioneer and the later Basran traditionist, Shu'ba b. al-Hajjaj (d. 160/777), vindicates Zuhri by observing that the Bedouin do not lie in matters of hadith. Malik b. Anas who was a student and friend of Zuhri said "If knowledge is barred from the common people because of the chosen group, the khassa, the chosen group will not get any good from it." A Prophetic tradition encouraging transmission even through common folk had gained wide expression and lent direct support to Zuhri "... may God illuminate the man who heard from us a hadith and carried it until he forwarded it to another person because it often happens that a man carries knowledge of the law to a man who is more familiar with the law than himself, and it often happens that a man who carries knowledge of the law is himself not a man of the law." Kister writes "It is startling how the idea that 'ilm may be transmitted by all classes of people was embraced by Muslim scholars. The old idea that hadith should be transmitted only by ashraf [nobles] was discarded. The new idea extolled the transmission of hadith by every person in Muslim society, young or old, rich or poor, and is very reminiscent of the grace of God, which was to be granted to the Banu Isra'il."

Given the modest beginnings of hadith transmission outlined above, it is hardly surprising that the activity of hadith authentication and dissemination had virtually no influence on legal methodology in the first Islamic century. The major centres of the empire (Medina, Kufa, Mecca, Basra, and Damascus) shared a basic legal culture especially as far as the order of priority of the sources of law was concerned. The Quran and consensual sunnaic practice of a region were primary sources. Ra'y was a third source and was applied when the primary sources lacked sufficient detail or were exhausted. But at the end of the first century (ca. 715) while Zuhri was working away at codifying and popularizing hadith transmission, and while legal specialists were
engaged in fiqh discussions in halaqas, change was already underway. Hadith transmission was becoming a fixation with vast numbers of Muslims and, as the second century progressed, this would especially be the case in the outlying conquered territories. We already get a sense from Kister’s words in the last paragraph that hadith transmission was a much easier science than fiqh and that it was a science that most people could easily understand and practice if need be. All one basically had to do was verify historical facts such as whether a transmitter was a student or acquaintance of the person on whose authority he was transmitting and whether each of the persons in the chain of transmission was a trustworthy individual. The conceptual basis of hadith transmission is not exactly rocket science, something that a lay mind has to wrestle with in order to understand. Moreover, hadith science was also very rewarding for the believer, at least on the face of things. Once the muhadithûn (hadith scholars) had authenticated a certain hadith, they must have realized that they had a genuine piece of history in their hands, a true saying or event from the life of the Prophet or one of the Companions. They had in hand something that had really happened, a real event in the life of a past hero, and this had to mean something, quite possibly a whole lot more than the fiqh based on the seemingly speculative and personal opinions of legal specialists. Thus, hadith transmission was not only easier to understand but also had gripping historical value for the believer. Rapture with hadith as a door to a past reality, as a form of sure historical knowledge, is the context in which ra’y began to be cast in a negative light. Ra’y was always a far cry from certain knowledge. Now it began to be seen less as considered or discretionary opinion and more as personal or arbitrary opinion, and because it generated a diversity of opinions, it began to be perceived as the root cause of fragmentation in law and society. Of course, ra’y was only the first step in a legal process that did generate regional unity as the scholars and people of a region formed a consensus (ijmâ) around one of the many opinions on offer. But the process of ijmâ formation was a slow grinding one and could easily have escaped the notice of lesser men, this last being a fair characterization of those followers of hadith science who unilaterally decided that all fiqh judgments must only be based on hadith to the exclusion of all other sources of law save the Quran (and even this was read through the lens of hadith). In other words, hadith is fiqh.

But how on Earth could hadith be fiqh especially if the hadith relevant to a case contradict the spirit of the Quran or the spirit of consensual sunnaic practice that was a reflection of the earliest Muslims’ understanding of the Prophetic intent. Surely hadith was merely one of the sources of law (because it is one of the inputs that can aid in the construction of Sunna) that could be deployed in situations where the Quran and consensual sunnaic practice failed to offer specific guidance. Zuhri zealously codified hadith because he thought he was preserving a database of evidence from the past that was one of the sources of law. But while he thought it critical to codify hadith, by one estimate, two-thirds or so of his own judgments in fiqh are not based on hadith. The obvious difference between hadith and fiqh is that while all authentic hadith relevant to a case must be considered, the final fiqh judgment can often contradict the hadith because the other sources of law (Quran, consensual sunnaic practice, ra’y) also have to be considered and they often trump the hadith. Men who had knowledge of the legal methodology of the major centres but still insisted on hadith-only fiqh ought to be considered
lesser men. On the other hand, those who were not acquainted with the methodology of the centres could possibly be viewed in a kinder light. Here they were, collecting hadith upon hadith that reported the words and deeds of the earliest Muslims. It seems overly optimistic to expect them to rigorously maintain a distinction between the example of the early Muslims, as recorded in the hadith they were collecting, and the way they should do things now, that is, normative practice in ritual and law (fiqh). Hadith, quite naturally, was fiqh and no further (legal) reasoning was necessary to get from the early record (hadith) to current normative practice (fiqh).

As the major centres differed from each other in their ījmā, this was also perceived by the followers of hadith science (ahl al-hadith or people of hadith) as a sign of weakness in the legal system. There was no unified view across the major centres on a plethora of ritualistic and legal issues. But the problem of unity, of course, is political, not legal. Had there been a strong Caliph at the centre whose legal judgment was respected and obeyed, his decision to act upon one legal opinion among many would forge political unity in the empire. This, for example, is how it was when the Companions gave opinions to 'Umar. He would act on one of those opinions and every one had to accept his decision. That’s unity, and it was attained through a fusion of spiritual and political authority in the Caliph. The solution, then, is to find a way to fuse spiritual and political authority, not to block the very production of legal opinion which is vital for any political leader to arrive at good decisions. For this reason, the perception of the ahl al-hadith that diverse legal opinions were a weakness of the system was a dangerous perception indeed. The empire’s debilitating sickness was the absence of a well-respected political authority at its helm, and to this sickness the hadith movement added a debilitating injury – over the next couple of centuries (2nd and 3rd Islamic centuries) it ground to a halt the production of meaningful legal opinion.

The overwhelming success of the hadith movement in the second Islamic century (ca. 715 – 815) basically came through strength in numbers. An early source attests that in the period 80-120/700-35 the major centres of hadith collection were the same as the major centres of fiqh, but even in these centres of fiqh the muhadithūn (hadith scholars or traditionists) were far more numerous than the fuqaha (legal specialists). Compared to the Hejaz, the muhadithūn/fuqaha balance was even more lopsided in Kufa, Basra and Syria. In this period Khurasan and Fustat (in Egypt) only marginally contributed to overall scholarship but the second century would witness the emergence of a mobile class of traditionists from such outlying areas who would not have a deep connection to the major centres of the first century. This made the transition to hadith-only fiqh all the more possible, because for such individuals a historically accurate and universally transmitted hadith was a far more compelling basis for normative practice than the consensual sunnaic practice of distant centres that differed amongst themselves as to what constituted right practice. One gets a sense that reversing the trend favouring hadith-only fiqh would have required a gargantuan effort on the part of the elite cadres of legal specialists of reaching out to the muhadithūn within and beyond the spheres of influence of the major
centres, a task that the legal specialists of the different centres were neither unified nor motivated to achieve.

As one of the younger centres of scholarship, one can imagine that Baghdad and its people were permeated with the new spirit of the *ahl al-hadith*. The Abbasids founded Baghdad as their capital city in 762 A.D. and it was destined less than a century later to become the arena for a critical confrontation between the legal methodology of the old centres and the *hadith-only fiqh* of the tradition(al)ists. The Abbasids came to power in 132/749 with the support of Shiites who were calling for recognition of the rights of the Prophet’s family. Some of the ideological reason for the Shiite support of the Abbasids was that the latter were, in contrast to the Ummayyads, descendents of the Prophet’s clan, the Banu Hashim. In consideration of Shiite support, the Abbasid Inquisition (*mihna*) (218-37/833-52) that began in the reign of the Caliph al-Ma’mun (198-218/813-33) insisted on the acceptance of the superiority of ‘Ali (who was the Prophet’s cousin) vis a vis the first three Caliphs. Al-Ma’mun was also inclined to the intellectualism of the Mu’tazila and further insisted that the Quran was created (a common sense Mu’tazili stance against the obstinate traditionalist position that the Quran was uncreated). The Mu’tazali and Abbasid insistence on driving home the point that the Quran was created had everything to do with hermeneutics and the role of human reason in interpretation. But leaders of the *ahl al-hadith* such as Ahmed b. Hanbal (d. 855) emphasized the centrality of revelation and the ‘repugnant nature of human reason’. In this, they seemed to have the support of the man on the street in Baghdad.

Beyond the claims regarding ‘Ali and the Quran, the Inquisition seemed to be aimed at establishing the Caliph as the arbiter of Islamic orthodoxy in opposition to Sunni jurists such as followers of Abu Hanifa, Malik, and al-Awza’i and individual jurists such as Ibn Hanbal. While most jurists probably saw the Caliph as overstepping his merely political authority, it is really leaders of the *ahl al-hadith* (e.g. Ibn Hanbal) who seem to have had the focused standpoint (‘repugnant nature of human reason’) and motivation to stand up to caliphal pressure and subsequent persecution. In any case, the *ahl al-hadith* probably had a good sense of their street power in Baghdad. Ibn Hanbal’s inflexibility and resoluteness made him a public hero, and when al-Ma’mun died in the middle of the raging controversy the intensity of the persecution subsided (Ibn Hanbal was released), and after this the Abbasid Caliphate never regained the religious authority that it had lost because of its controversial religious views and forceful imposition of them. Subsequently, it is the Mu’tazila who suffered the most as they lost the Caliph’s protection and then became the target of a nexus of the Sunni orthodoxy and future Abbasid caliphs.

Interestingly, these developments were most probably critical for a meteoric rise of the Shafi’i school of *fiqh*. Though Ibn Hanbal rose to fame in the Mihna, he was not a well-trained jurist (there was no juristic tradition in his family) and did not have an armoury of juristic methods and technical terms as were possessed by the older and more established schools such as the Hanafi and Maliki. However, his teacher Shafi’i had all the necessary sophistication in addition to a juristic method that was strongly *hadith*-based. As a result, the followers of Ibn Hanbal
(especially, for example, Ibn Qutayba) combined Hanbali populism with Shafi’ite juristic sophistication and this may be the single most important factor that contributed to the meteoric establishment of the Shafi’i school as an independent madhab. And so, decades after the death of its founder, riding the wave of the hadith movement and Hanbali populism, the Shafi’i school would place increasing pressure on the older, established Hanafi and Maliki schools for failing to respect the chained tradition, and such pressure would result in a considerable loss of originality in the latter schools, and in a real sense reduce them to being just another form of hadith-based jurisprudence. This is how the mould of classical Islam was finally cast.

Ibn Hanbal’s resistance to the Inquisition is legendary but so is his insistence not to engage in rational debate. The Mu’tazili account ‘stresses his admitted incompetence in kalam whereas the Hanbali [account] stresses the rationalists’ inability to come up with arguments from the Qur’an and hadith’. The early Hanbali position on rational debate is well articulated by the Hanbali leader al-Barbahari (d. 329/941):

Stop at what is ambiguous in the Qur’an and hadith. Explain nothing. Do not look for any device with which to refute heretics, for you have been enjoined to silence before them. Do not give them power over you.

This is an eloquent expression of the fact that the victory of the hadith-only community came not through debate but through strength in numbers. No doubt they faced the practical necessity of resisting an intrusion into the community’s realm of authority. The hadith-only community believed it had the authority to define Islamic orthodoxy and the challenge to this authority came from a particularly uninspiring opponent in the form of the Abbasid Caliph. Understandably, Ibn Hanbal, his colleagues, and followers believed that they had the higher moral ground. The external pressure and furnace of political oppression would seem to have hardened them in their intellectually substandard beliefs.

Hadith-only jurisprudence may be seen to culminate in the fiqh of Ahmad b. Hanbal (780-855 A.D). Melchert offers the following comment on Ibn Hanbal’s fiqh: ‘Hadith reports are not just authorities corroborating his opinions, they practically are his opinions.’ Spectorisky offers a comment in the same direction: ‘If he [Ibn Hanbal] cannot answer a question satisfactorily within the framework of traditions, he prefers not to answer at all’. These comments reflect the early Hanbali stance that hadith is the sole source of Sunna and that the study of fiqh required (in addition to a study of the Quran) only the study of hadith and no more. But why did the ahl-e-hadith focus solely on hadith in this way. Why did they ignore other possible sources of law especially 1) common sense operating within the framework of Quranic principles and 2) the consensual sunnaic practice of centres such as Medina and Kufa? I believe that the emergence of hadith-only jurisprudence was made possible because of a general deterioration in the intellectual climate of Islam. There is no substantial reason why the sources of law should be restricted to hadith and so hadith-only jurists could not have offered such a reason even if they had been inclined to look for reasons (it would appear that down to a man they were not inclined in this way).
When I speak of a general deterioration in the intellectual climate I mean that the values of self-honesty, introspection, and courage in asking basic questions were in long term decline in Islamic society in general. Nothing less would explain why other sources such as common sense and living tradition (consensual sunnaic practice) would be ignored without good reason. The only explanation seems to be that young scholars and members of the community in general began to swarm around the hadith-only jurists and failed to ask obvious questions. As I have already mentioned, the hadith literature had the advantage of seeming to be a pipeline to the truth because it transparently captured genuine historical events. But rapture with the transparent authenticity of the material seems to have distracted people from the critical question of whether the material was normative, and this is especially surprising because there were other sources available that could lay claim to being both authentic and normative.

And so I believe that the overall process through which hadith-only jurisprudence triumphed can really only be explained as the inundation of an intellectually superior minority by an intellectually inferior majority. This explanation has a Nietzschean ring to it. There is a reversal in the order of things and the inferior ‘decadent type of man’ has taken the place of the ‘strong’ and ‘truthful’ type of man. The ‘herd animal’ has ascended and the ‘exceptional man must have been devalued into evil’. It would appear that the supermen (overmen) of Islam lost political control of their civilization with the assassination of the fourth Caliph (661 A.D), and then lost legal control in the latter half of the 8th century because of the overwhelming success of the hadith movement. Large numbers of the ‘herd animal’ began to flock to the hadith movement and began to assume that the hadith they were collecting was law with no further need for consideration of other sources of law. That this assumption was simply groundless was no matter to their herd animal instinct. It is an assumption that gave them stability and surety in their faith. They sought external criteria of stability such as belonging to a moralistic community and following daily routine rather than internal criteria such as thinking along principles of reason (which may often come at the expense of external stability). The moralistic community opted out of the frivolous distractions of life in order to soberly focus on the divine. To this end they restrained themselves from laughing, humour, music, and chess. More worrying perhaps is their liking of mediocrity because excellence and specialization in worldly endeavour was also seen as a distraction from the experience of God. One may ask why God cannot be experienced through excellence in worldly endeavour but this is not a question that would have occurred to the hadith-only community. They aimed at attaining a balance of mediocrity that was accessible to the average man. The greatest cause for alarm is that even evidently sizable and non-digestible items such as politics and rational thought were seen as distractions from the true spiritual goal! This last goal was attained not through an experience of God through the struggle to survive, reason, and excel but rather through straightforward obedience mostly in matters of the mundane (ritual and norm). Thus, we can easily imagine that had Nietzsche been aware of the hadith-only community they would have been the object of his derision no less than the Christian priests and ascetics whose will to power was also fuelled by a singular lack of self-honesty.
3. Malik vs Shafi’i: The Emergence of Classical Islam

It is illuminating to have a closer look at the controversy between the legal culture of the early schools and that of the ahl al-hadith through an examination of the views of two of the most prominent jurists of the 2nd Islamic century. The first of these is Malik (d. 179/795), his famous extant work being the Muwatta’ that preserves Medinese doctrine to the middle of the 2nd century, and the second is his one time student Shafi’i (d. 204/820) who settled in Egypt where he penned his mature views in the Risala and Kitab al-Umm. As far as the fuqaha vs. ahl al-hadith controversy in concerned, the older Malik is closer to the fuqaha while the younger Shafi’i is closer to the ahl al-hadith.

Malik was probably too old to have experienced the pressure of the hadith movement in all its intensity but Shafi’i would have experienced it early in his career. In keeping with the ahl al-hadith, Shafi’i elevated hadith to being the second source of law after the Quran. But this is not the only controversial move that he makes. He further goes on to place an unprecedented restriction on the hadith saying that the hadith that really count are the reports about the Prophet to the exclusion of reports about other early Muslim personalities including the four righteous caliphs. This is an altogether novel restriction on the sources of law (it is specifically a restriction on hadith) and even went against the established practice of the ahl al-hadith. So we may see Shafi’i’s first move as restricting the sources of law to hadith followed by a second move that further restricted even that source to Prophetic hadith. In neither case does Shafi’i offer rational justification so it would seem that both moves are driven by external pressures.108

Shafi’i places tremendous emphasis on his rule that an authentic hadith from the Prophet overrides all other considerations in the determination of right practice, but he does not offer a single sound reason for it in the entire corpus of his extant work. This strongly corroborates Hallaq’s point that the systematic study of principles of jurisprudence (usūl al-fiqh) developed well after Shafi’i’s time thereby explaining why Shafi’i did not feel pressed to offer a rational defence of his principle.109 With no rational basis offered for the principle it has no chance of surviving as a principle of jurisprudence in the truth paradigm that I introduced in Chapter 4: Section 2. Let us remember that in the truth paradigm a principle is beyond question only because it is discovered by reason and because reason does not have the means to question it any further. Obviously, it cannot be beyond question if it is something that an individual determines on the basis of the social pressures that he experiences. To repeat, a principle of jurisprudence is not normative unless it is both discovered by reason and reason also lacks the wherewithal to question it further. Shafi’i’s principle is not normative because it is not even the product of a rational debate let alone beyond rational scrutiny.

Yasin Dutton (The Origins of Islamic Law) offers an insightful analysis of some cases that reveal the hollowness of Shafi’i’s rule. While the cases often concern matters of ritual and would thus
seem to have no wide ranging legal implications, our focus should really be on the method being used by the early jurists rather than on the legal magnitude of the case. This is because it is method that was basically adopted by later jurists and that set the tone for Islamic jurisprudence for hundreds of years to come. Any irrationality in the early method came to be multiplied several fold in later jurisprudence and sent Islamic civilization off on a tangent to its ideal trajectory.

The case of raf’ al-yadayn (‘raising the hands’) offers a particularly stark example of the irrationality of following Prophetic hadith over and above all other considerations. Our story begins with Malik’s Muwatta where there is an authentic report with excellent transmitters (rijāl) and chains of transmission (isnād) that the Prophet used to raise his hands after coming up from ruku (bowing posture). Another similarly authentic report says that the Companion ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Umar used to do the same. Shafi’i uses these hadith as a basis for associating the practice of raf’ al-yadayn with ruku. By contrast, Malik’s view goes against the content of these reports. Malik’s reason for ruling against the hadith is that these reports do not reflect the living tradition or ‘amāl in Medina. As one of Malik’s main students and transmitter of his Muwatta, Shafi’i must have been well-versed with Malik’s argument. Strangely enough, however, he fails to engage Malik on this point. Had he done so, we would have witnessed the first major discussion on usūl al-fiqh in the early 9th century as opposed to the 10th century when, according to strong evidence presented by Hallaq, the field finally emerged. Let’s take a look at Malik’s argument.

Malik’s basic point is one of common sense. Medina was the city of the Prophet and it is the city where he spent the last period of his life. At his death there were 10,000 or so Companions in Medina. Now the Prophet’s way of offering prayer would be carefully observed by the Companions in Medina and it is unlikely that different opinions on right practice could endure within the city while the Prophet was still there setting a live example. Thus, the way of offering prayer was passed on in Medina from the generation of Companions as a whole to the next generation and so on until Malik’s own time. Malik observes this uniformity of practice in his own time saying with regard to the raf’al-yadayn of ruku that ‘I do not know of this [practice]...’. Shafi’i seems nowhere to engage this common sense approach of his former teacher. He does not explain why he follows a handful of isolated hadith reports in the face of a flood of living Medine tradition transmitted mutawatir style from thousands of people to thousands of others in succeeding generations. Au contraire, in the case of raf’ al-yadayn, Shafi’i rejects outright the Medine ‘amāl argument saying effectively ‘Who are these people because of whose ‘amāl these hadiths are not acted upon?’ But Malik’s point is that this is something that the Medine could hardly have got wrong and this is why he glibly sets down the two authentic hadith contradicting his own position. As Dutton observes, Malik includes the hadith because he feels that they are authentic and wants to consider them before making his decision. However, he rules against them because he does not take them to be normative in the face of living tradition. As for explaining why these isolated reports should exist in contradiction to living tradition, an obvious possibility may be suggested. The Prophet used to perform raf’ al-
yadayn with ruku and was observed doing so but later stopped the practice. This would explain why the Companion Ibn ‘Umar who lived in Medina was also reported to have done so but because of the Prophet’s abrogation of the practice it never became part of Medineş ‘amāl.

An important point regarding the manner of offering prayer is that it is something that would necessarily be done in imitation of the Prophet and so there would be no confusion in the matter because of ijtihād on the part of any other early personality. The manner of offering prayer is ‘amāl naqli (practice purely in imitation of the Prophet) as opposed to ‘amāl ijtihādi (practice in the Prophetic spirit but evolving to accommodate changing circumstances). So there is hardly any possibility of error or disagreement among the people of Medina regarding ra‘ al-yadayn.

There are other examples of similar practices that should also be considered ‘amāl naqli. These include reciting the Fatiha in the prayer without saying ‘bi-smi llahi l-rahmani l-rahim’, standing for prayer with hands by the side (sadī al-yadayn), and the way of calling adhān (call to prayer). In fact, the adhān in Makka was different to the one in Medina, the one in Medina having the advantage of being the later of the two and the one being practiced when the Prophet died. When Malik was asked about this he said ‘I do not know about the adhan of a day and a night. Here is the mosque of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, where the adhan has been done from then until now and no-one has ever recorded any objection to the way the adhan has been done here’.

There is a long report of an interaction between Malik and the Iraqi faqih Abu Yusuf (Abu Hanifa’s student) that speaks volumes for the strength of Malik’s ‘amāl argument:

Abu Yusuf said [to Malik], ‘You do the adhan with tarij’, but you have no hadith from the Prophet about this.’ Malik turned to him and said, ‘Subhāna llah! I have never seen anything more amazing than this! The call to the prayer has been done [here] every day five times a day in front of witnesses, and sons have inherited it from their fathers since the time of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. Does this need ‘So-and-so from so-and-so’? This is more accurate (asahh) in our opinion than hadith!’

Abu Yusuf also asked him about the sa [a weight standard] and Malik said, ‘Five and one-third ratls.’ Abu Yusuf said, ‘What is your basis for saying that?’ Malik said to some of the people with him, ‘Go and fetch the sa’s that you have.’ So many of the people of Madina, both Muhajirin and Ansar, came, and every one of them brought a sa [with him] and said, ‘This is the sa which I inherited from my father, who inherited it from his father who was one of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.’ Malik said, ‘This sort of widespread knowledge is more reliable (athbat) in our opinion than hadith.’ So Abu Yusuf accepted Malik’s opinion.

Malik fails to see the need for a special record of such a regular and widespread practice as the adhān. Dutton offers the insight that it is only the unusual that tends to be specially recorded
and so what we find in the written hadith record could often be exceptions to regular practice. Dutton:

It must be further remembered that records in general over-represent the unusual, and hadiths are no exception to this rule. What is usual – e.g. the way of doing the adhan, or of standing for the prayer – will often be taken for granted and not merit any special mention, whereas what is unusual may well attract what seems undue attention. One must therefore approach the hadith-literature with a certain amount of circumspection as to how accurately it represents the normative sunna, as well as bearing in mind that although the fuqaha’ were concerned with recording the main norms, they were often more concerned with defining the finer details of the law and would thus be dealing with, and recording, a large proportion of exceptional cases. As a result, individual, ‘one-off’, events may appear from the literature to be as normal as something that happened very frequently, and, conversely, something that happened very frequently may not even be recorded.118

How surprised should we be that the later community may have often adopted exceptional practices as the norm? I feel that we should not find this surprising. For example, in some Eastern cultures certain romantic couples have become legendary historical figures because of the way they overcame overwhelming social resistance to their union. Their story was probably related at first because society found their behaviour puzzling and aberrant. With the families of the couple so upset it probably served as an excellent lesson to all young people. With the passage of time, however, the way the story is told seems to have changed and the same aberrant behaviour is now seen as heroic.119 So human nature seems to have the inbuilt flexibility to see aberrant behaviour as the standard or norm.

Another cause for wonder at Shafi‘i’s intransigence against his teacher is the Medinese caliphate. After the Prophet, Medina was the centre of the Muslim world for 30 or so years until the fourth Caliph moved the capital to Kufa. In this Medinese period immediately following the Prophet, one imagines that Medinese ‘amāl would be perfected and consolidated under the vigilant eye of the four righteous Caliphs. It is difficult to imagine that an incorrect practice (especially ‘amāl naqli) would go unchecked during this period. Moreover, Companions from all over the empire would naturally report differences in practice to the Caliph in Medina and these matters would be resolved and applied in Medina before other places. Medina would naturally be the intellectual focal point of the empire where Companions would return for refresher courses as it were. It seems naturally the place where knowledge would be systematized and disseminated. Malik offers the example of the learned Companion ‘Abdullah b. Mas’ud who gave a legal judgment in Kufa but later, on a visit to Medina, found the position there to be different from his own. The first thing he did on returning to Kufa was to reverse his judgment in favour of the one in Medina.120

Even hadith, championed by Shafi‘i, support Malik’s view against him. One of these is the Prophet’s directive ‘You must hold to my sunna and the sunna of the rightly-guided Caliphs after
me’. The ‘rightly-guided Caliphs’ are defined in another hadith as those of the first 30 years and this of course is the period of the first four Caliphs in Medina.\textsuperscript{121} It was in the fourth Caliph ‘Ali’s reign (656-661/35-40) that the capital was moved to Kufa. The Prophet’s directive covering 30 years applies to the four Caliphs and not to Medina but they reigned for almost all of that time from Medina.

Within the Medinese caliphate, the most stable period was the reign of ‘Umar (634-44/13-23). This was also a period of expansion that necessitated more legal activity than ever before as new situations were arising. Malik’s Muwatta’ is firmly grounded in ‘Umar’s judgments which are only second in importance in his book after the Prophet’s. Malik was also deeply impressed by ‘Umar’s son, ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar who of all the siblings is said to have been most like his father, and by his grandson Salim ibn ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar who of all his siblings is said to have been most like his father. Malik saw ‘Umar’s judicial activity as a ‘genuine extension of the Prophetic sunna’. When he taught in the mosque in Medina he is said to have consciously chosen the place where ‘Umar used to sit.\textsuperscript{122} Considering the golden tradition that Malik follows, it is quite difficult to explain Shafi’i’s motivation for disregarding it.

The only possibly effective argument that Shafi’i seems to bring against Malik is that contemporary Medinese were not uniformly following the ‘amāl of their predecessors and were divided as to what this ‘amāl was.\textsuperscript{123} An objection similar to this is contained in al-Layth ibn Sa’d’s reply to a letter from Malik in which Malik had counselled al-Layth to give fatwa’s in accordance with Medinese ‘amāl.\textsuperscript{124} Al-Layth had objected that there were cases in which the Medinese ‘ulama were themselves not agreed. But for cases in which there was agreement in Medina, al-Layth deferred to Malik’s principle of the superiority of Medinese ‘amāl (because it reflected the true Sunna). Thus Malik and most probably Shafi’i were already aware that there were these objections and, as Dutton shows, Malik was careful to differentiate cases in which there was universal agreement in Medina from others in which there was various degrees of difference of opinion.\textsuperscript{125} It is thus something of a mystery why Shafi’i chooses to reject Malik’s ‘amāl principle.

What motivated Shafi’i to adopt the position he did despite the high likelihood that he once had a clear understanding of his teacher’s argument? Shafi’i’s rejection of the ‘amāl argument seems to be made possible because of the earlier Iraqi rejection of it. After his time in Medina, Shafi’i sojourned in Iraq before finally settling in Egypt. Perhaps we should naturally expect that Medinese ‘amāl would not be accepted as authoritative outside Medina and we know that in Iraq Abu Hanifa and his two main students, Abu Yusuf and al-Shaybani, wanted more text based proof, as they had less faith in the undocumented ‘amāl of a distant city. It would appear that Shafi’i also came under their influence (though it could be said that he should have known better).\textsuperscript{126} Shafi’i’s time in Iraq seems to have helped to distance him from the ‘amāl argument and there may be some evidence for this in the observation that his Risala ‘was written originally as an apologia for the supremacy of traditions’ (italics added).\textsuperscript{127} Shafi’i’s later Egyptian work is far from apologetic suggesting that his conviction that Sunna=hadith strengthened with time.
Shafi’i’s sojourn in Iraq may begin to explain his distancing from Malik and the Medinese ‘amāl argument. But while the Iraqi experience may explain Shafi’i’s negative stand that ‘amāl is not universal Sunna, it does not seem to account for his positive stand that hadīth is universal Sunna because the folks in Iraq were not keen on making hadīth the sole basis of Sunna and would in fact reject a hadīth if it went against a common sense reading of the Quran or even against Iraqi ‘amāl. Of course it is from the ahl al-hadīth that Shafi’i got his insistence on the need for authentic chains of hadīth transmission as the basis for Sunna. Hadīth chains were superior to a living tradition (‘amāl) whose links to the past were many (mutawatīr transmission) but invisible because they were not being recorded.

Shafi’i’s acceptance of the Quran and hadīth as the revealed texts of Islam and of this revelation as the final arbiter of human affairs would seem clearly to be a compromise that he made because of the growing power of the hadīth movement. That it was only a compromise and not a caving in is obvious from his insistence, against the practice of hadīth-only jurists, that hadīth be restricted to Prophetic hadīth only. Thus, Shafi’i was clearly charting new territory. That he was thinking independently of the hadīth-only jurists is also confirmed by the concessions that he offered the rationalists who were responsible for much of his training. Men such as Malik, al-Shaybani, and a number of Mu’tazili mentors and associates are behind Shafi’i’s intimate knowledge of rationalist fiqh and kalam. The most important concessions Shafi’i made to the rationalists was to uphold qiyās, ijtihād, and ijmā’ as rational instruments actually prescribed by the revealed texts themselves. These instruments were to be practiced within the limits set by revelation (Quran and hadīth). What Shafi’i offered was a grand synthesis of reason and revelation, with revelation setting limits and reason operating within those limits. But as we saw in Chapter 4: Section 2, reason must define its own limits and so Shafi’i’s synthesis is suboptimal. Shafi’i fails to offer reasons for the limits set by revelation and thus fails to allow reason to set its own limits. In the main example of this already discussed above, he does not offer reasons why hadīth (and not Medinese ‘amāl or Quranic common sense) set limits to reason. We saw Shafi’i failing to rationally engage Malik on the normativity of Medinese ‘amāl, and instead simply asserting without argument the normativity of hadīth. Even in the concessions that Shafi’i makes to the rationalists he seems only to be responding to the external pressure of community demand. Shafi’i may have sensed uneasiness in the general community with the inherent rigidity and resulting paralysis of hadīth-only jurisprudence (a paralysis characteristic of early Hanbali fiqh and reflected in Spector’s comment that if Ibn Hanbal ‘cannot answer a question satisfactorily within the framework of traditions, he prefers not to answer at all’). To be fair to Shafi’i, and especially given his own rationalist training, in addition to sensing the community’s demand, he would also have seen that an ossified hadīth-only system of law had less potential to evolve. While this would only reconfirm the overall pragmatism in his approach, an appreciation of the need for evolution in law is at least more rational than simply responding to the community’s demands. In any event, he offers a synthesis of traditionalism and rationalism that had the potential to appeal to the vast majority, and as Hallaq shows, about a century later it in fact did.12 In the 9th century, there was a compromise in the making between traditionalists and rationalists with the traditionalists accepting the validity of qiyās and the rationalists

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accepting the normativity of hadith.\textsuperscript{133} This compromise seemed to protect tradition while at the same time giving room to jurists for limited rational manoeuvring (the community would probably have seen this as much needed room for it gave relief from burdensome tradition and scope for addressing new problems). Shafi’i’s synthesis seems to be an early reading of the possibility of this compromise and a century after his passing he was hailed as the founder of \textit{usūl al-fiqh} because of his emphatic articulation of this novel (though rudimentary) \textit{hadīth-qiyās}, or, in more general terms, text-reason, synthesis.\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Usūl al-fiqh} is the discipline that informs us on the principles of reason in interpreting revelation and thus on the balance of reason and revelation, rationalism and traditionalism.\textsuperscript{135} It is this balance that Shafi’i’s synthesis sub-optimally attained and that became the classical view of Islam for several hundred years after his time.

I sense that one of Shafi’i’s main motivations in equating Sunna with Prophetic hadith is his concern to unite the \textit{umma} on a single universal rule. It ought to be clear to us that this concern is misplaced and that it makes very little sense to create uniformity in the interpretation of every detail of Shari’a. Different jurists will, and indeed should, have different interpretations. The problem of unity is political not legal. The community should see the practical need for unified political action and to this end the caliph should be a person whose legal decisions are respected and binding. He should fuse political and legal authority so that his decision to act upon one legal opinion among many would forge political unity in the empire. This, for example, is how it was when the Companions gave opinions to Abu Bakr or ‘Umar. They would act on one of those opinions and everyone had to accept that decision. That’s unity, and it was attained through a fusion of spiritual/legal and political authority in the Caliph. The solution, then, is to find a way to fuse spiritual and political authority, not to block the very production of legal opinion which is vital for any political leader to arrive at good decisions. The early Caliphs demonstrate how unified and sound political action is possible despite (and actually because of) a healthy diversity of legal interpretations. In attempting to create an artificial uniformity in legal interpretation, Shafi’i was clearly holding the wrong end of the stick. The empire’s debilitating sickness was the absence of a well-respected political authority at its helm, and to this sickness Shafi’i sought to add the debilitating injury of grounding to a halt the production of meaningful legal opinion.

4. Traditionalism as the Problem

We saw that Shafi’i struggles to arrive at a universal rule by declaring Prophetic hadith normative. But the search for a universal rule is not limited to Shafi’i and we find Malik engaged in the same quest. The difference between the two is that it is considerably more difficult to identify the error in Malik’s method. We get more than a glimpse, in Malik’s rulings, of ‘Umar’s style of common sense decision making. We see this, for example, in his view on the \textit{khiyar al-majlis} (‘the right to withdraw from a sale while the two parties to it are still together’).\textsuperscript{136} On the
basis of an authentic hadith, Shaf‘i argues in favor of khiyar al-majlis holding that a contract may be annulled by either party as long as neither party has left the place where the contract was made. Against this, Malik and Abu Hanifa argue that honouring one’s contracts is a Quranic obligation and that a contract cannot be annulled on the basis of evidence from a hadith, however authentic it may be. Their common sense view was that a contract is a contract - once made it is binding regardless of where the parties are afterwards. It is Malik who set down in his Muwatta’ the hadith in favour of Shaf‘i’s position (the hadith allowing khiyar al-majlis). Malik sets it down because of its undeniable authenticity but, according to his usual practice, he does so only to rule against it. This and other instances seem to be a reflection in Malik of some of ‘Umar’s bold, common sense approach to fiqh. In this case, Malik wields common sense Quran against authentic hadith. But at second glance this reflection of ‘Umar in Malik is not quite as pure as it may initially seem to be. The reflection seems contaminated with a strong dose of traditionalism in Malik’s approach that may be the result of the gaping chasm of a century between him and the Prophet (this obviously not being a disadvantageous factor in ‘Umar’s case). In fact, the critical factor that seems to goad Malik on to use a common sense reading of the Quran (against khiyar al-majlis) is that khiyar al-majlis was not the practice in Medina. After setting down the hadith in favour of khiyar al-majlis, Malik comments ‘There is no fixed limit for this here, nor any established practice regarding it [i.e. in Medina].’ Thus, Malik’s motivation is twofold. There is common sense Quran and there is Medinese ‘amāl. One gets the distinct feeling that Malik’s courageous use of common sense is really made possible because of its confirmation by Medinese practice. By contrast, Abu Hanifa seems to be motivated more by common sense than anything else and would thus seem to offer a truer reflection of ‘Umar’s approach.

A similar observation on Malik’s traditionalism provokes the following comment by Dutton:

Nevertheless, as will already be obvious from the discussions on Medinan ‘amāl above, the overwhelming tendency in Malik’s case (and indeed the intention behind the Muwatta’) is to preserve the traditional picture with all its peculiarities rather than to try to change, adapt or systematize it in any way.¹³⁷

Some of the motivation for Malik’s traditionalism seems to come from his view of the Medinese way as the bearer of the true Sunna. As Dutton explains, Malik’s concept of Sunna is not parochial (as in the sunna of Medina versus that of Kufa) but rather universal (the Sunna is the same for Medina and Kufa).¹³⁸ In his letter to al-Layth, Malik says that ‘all people are subordinate to the people of Medina’ and he makes it quite clear that Medinese practice is the true bearer of Prophetic Sunna and is thus the model all Muslims should follow. Malik to al-Layth:

So, if there is something which is clearly acted upon in Madina, I am not of the opinion that anyone may go against it, because of this inheritance that [the Madinans] have which it is not permissible for any others to ascribe to, or claim for, themselves. Even if the people of other cities were to say, ‘This is the practice in our city’, or ‘This is what
Thus, Malik’s traditionalism (that is, his attempt to preserve the Medinese way) is really his attempt at preserving the Sunna because for him ‘clearly acted upon’ Medinese ‘amāl is the universal Sunna. There seem to be clear parallels in this with Shafi’i’s traditionalism. For Shafi’i, authentic Prophetic hadith is the Sunna. Any new law must fall within the framework and spirit of the Quran and hadith. For Malik, agreed upon Medinese ‘amāl is the Sunna. Any new law must fall within the framework and spirit of the Quran and Medinese ‘amāl. For both (as for Ibn Hanbal, Abu Hanifa and most everyone) the sources of law are the Quran and Sunna, only there is difference of opinion as to what texts or practices truly reflect the Sunna. For Shafi’i it is hadith and for Malik it is ‘amāl.

What is noteworthy is that both Shafi’i and Malik want a universal rule for Sunna. Both appear to perceive that the need of the hour is to have a single rule for all Muslims probably out of a concern for Muslim unity. However, as I explained earlier, unity cannot be attained through uniformity in Shari’a interpretation because such uniformity is necessarily an artificial construct. Jurists will always differ, as they should, in the interpretations they offer. The problem of unity is not a legal one. Rather, it is political. The head of state must command the respect of all those who have juridical opinions. When he decides a matter then his decision should be respected by all concerned. The solution is not to smother differences of legal opinion. It is rather to see the practical need for unified political action.

Two cases offer a good illustration of the drawbacks of Malik’s traditionalism and the unsuitability of his rule that Medinese ‘amāl is universal Sunna. While Abu Hanifa’s general position of denying the superiority of Medinese ‘amāl is difficult to defend given the strength of Malik’s argument on that point, he does take a refreshingly common sense view against Malik’s traditionalism in both of the following cases. The first case is zakat on horses. Malik sets down in the Muwatta’ a Prophetic directive that a Muslim does not have to pay zakat on his horse. One may sense that the reason (‘illa) for this may have been the Prophet’s desire to encourage the breeding of horses for war. This intuition is reinforced by the Prophetic incentive of greater war booty for a man with a horse.140 But if horses are not bred for war and bred instead for wealth creation, common sense would dictate that there should be zakat on them. Abu Hanifa makes a move in this direction by ruling that free-grazing (sa’ima) horses intended for breeding should be subject to zakat. Medinese ‘amāl, however, is against zakat on horses and this determines Malik’s view.

If we go back to ‘Umar’s time, however, we find that not taking zakat on horses is not a Prophetic directive set in stone. ‘Umar, for one, was willing to open the issue for debate. There is a report in the Muwatta’ (as also in Abd al-Razzaq’s Musannaf) that the Syrians during ‘Umar’s caliphate had requested that zakat be taken on their horses. At first, ‘Umar refused to do so saying that no one had done this before.141 But when the Syrians insisted he gathered the Companions for advice. ‘Ali suggested that the zakat should be taken from them, as they were
giving it of their own free will.\footnote{Umar accepted the suggestion adding that this zakat money should be redistributed inside Syria.\footnote{I believe that the critical point to note is ‘Umar’s openness to suggestion. It should be noted that despite ‘Umar’s openness, taking zakat on horses never became a practice in Medina (even though Mu’awiyah (r. 661-80) continued ‘Umar’s practice in Damascus?\footnote{The point is only that for ‘Umar, as for Abu Hanifa later, the Prophetic directive is not set in stone. Abu Hanifa feels that it is high time that we subject horses (that we do not feed, ride, or breed for war) to zakat. Whereas Abu Hanifa is using common sense, Malik is swayed by Medinese ‘amāl. It would appear that Abu Hanifa is at an advantage because he is not burdened with the responsibility of preserving such a humbling tradition as that of Medina. ‘Umar, of course, did his work too early in the life of Islam to be burdened by a community tradition. It also seems that by the end of the 8th century traditionalism had won the day because Abu Hanifa seems alone in advocating his view – a view that even his students Abu Yusuf and al-Shaybani would reject siding instead with the traditional minded majority.\footnote{The second case is zakat on fresh fruit and vegetables. Malik says: ‘The sunna about which there is no disagreement among us, and that which I have heard from the people of knowledge, is that there is no zakat on any sort of fruit (fawākīh), …, fodder (qadd) or vegetables (buqūl)’.\footnote{Al-Shafi’i agrees with Malik on this matter not because of Medinese practice but for the very different reason that there is no hadith giving the instruction of zakat for fresh fruit and vegetables. Naturally, there would in time be an increase in the volume of trade in fresh fruit and vegetable and so Abu Hanifa, using common sense, invoked a general interpretation of another Prophetic directive according to which zakat (a tenth) should be due from ‘what is watered by the sky’ and should also be due (a twentieth) from what needs to be irrigated.}\footnote{Analysis
The hadith movement was a traditional movement in the sense that it wanted to preserve traditions of the early Muslims and did not want to admit sources of fiqh (‘amāl, ra’y) other than the hadith that reported these traditions. This is so even when there was often sufficient reason to admit other sources. Moreover, as the case of ibn Hanbal illustrated, the hadith movement did not want to go beyond hadith in making legal decisions, so that it had a more or less closed attitude towards potential sufficient reasons in its surrounding environment. As sufficient reasons were not allowed to challenge its literal reading of the hadith material, the hadith movement represented a blind literalism. Shafi’i did his work at a time when the fuqaha were under considerable external pressure from the hadith movement and because of this pressure his final synthesis of reason and revelation incorporated a significant dose of hadith-based traditionalism. Thus, while rational jihād has a role in Shafi’i’s fiqh, its role is a limited tradition-bound one. We can say that Shafi’i seems to espouse a hadith-based literalism that is more responsive to sufficient reasons then the blind literalism of the hadith movement. Let’s say that he espouses a blinkered rather than a blind literalism. With our analysis of Malik, we came to realize that traditionalism had actually set in well before Shafi’i’s time. However, unlike Shafi’i, Malik formed his views of fiqh too early in the 2nd Islamic century to have felt significant}}}}

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pressure from the hadith movement. The traditionalism that weighs him down is not hadith-based but rather it is the traditionalism of Medinese ‘amāl. We looked at cases where Malik failed to be responsive to sufficient reasons against Medinese ‘amāl. This gives us the insight that it is not hadith or ‘amāl or for that matter literalism that is the problem but rather traditionalism in its various forms whether hadith-based or ‘amāl-based. Traditionalism has a sedating influence on human nature and renders people incapable of keeping a lookout for sufficient reasons that require them to abandon literalist textual understandings and offer a timely response to changing circumstances. There is another way to say the same thing. It can be said rather in the language of the relationship between reason and tradition. We can say that the key is to see that good sense can be applied to many problems but there are cases where reason, seeing its limits, yields to literal revelation/tradition. ‘Umar exemplified this attitude. The Prophet had given an order that the blood money (diyyat) for a finger is ten camels.148 ‘Umar did not see that Prophetic order as binding in a rigid way, and seeing with common sense that the thumb and index finger are more useful than the other fingers he wanted to proportionally increase the diyyat for them.149 However, when ‘Umar learned of a Prophetic tradition saying that all the fingers were of equal value, he withdrew his suggestion.150 To state the obvious, if the fingers were of equal value in the Prophet’s time they would obviously have to be of equal value in ‘Umar’s time. As it was the Prophet who declared that to be so, ‘Umar had no rational basis for questioning it. Thus, we find a person ready to apply good sense to any problem and also ready to withdraw if he sees the case to be beyond the limits of reason. This is a person who is able to identify the sufficient reason that overrides literal interpretation but can also discern when the reason is not sufficient so that the literal reading must stand. This, then, would be the new mujtahid, who in the spirit of ‘Umar is open to suggestion and willing to apply good sense to any problem while at the same time is deeply respectful of tradition. He is both a respectful literalist and a responsive rationalist.

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1 Though sunna essentially means “exemplary conduct” it does not make good sense to speak of God’s example because, as indicated later in the paragraph, it is not one that man can follow. Instead, we can usefully think of God’s sunna as His way of doing things or His practice. Fazlur Rahman writes that ‘Ibn Durayd, in his Jamharah (and he is followed in this by other lexicographers), gives the original meaning of the verb sannah as “sawwara (al-shay’a)”, i.e., to fashion a thing or produce it as a model. Next, it is applied to behavior which is considered a model. Here (and this is the sense relevant to us) sannah would be best translated by “he set an example”.’ See Rahman, Fazlur, Islamic Methodology in History, Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute Press, 1984 (2nd reprint) p. 2.

2 For the times and manner of prayers see Muwatta’ of Malik b. Anas, Hadith no. 1: “‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz one day delayed a prayer. ‘Urwah ibn al-Zubayr entered upon him and informed him that al-Mughirah ibn Shu’bah, while in Kufah, once delayed a prayer, but Abu Mas’ud al-Ansari came to him and said: ‘What is this, O Mughirah! Did you not know that Gabriel came down and prayed and the Prophet prayed (with him); then (again) Gabriel prayed (i.e., the next prayer) and the Prophet prayed (with him); then (again) Gabriel prayed (i.e., the third prayer) and the Prophet did likewise; then again Gabriel prayed (i.e., the fourth prayer) and likewise did the Prophet; and then (again) Gabriel prayed (i.e., the fifth prayer) and so did the Prophet?’ The Prophet then said, ‘Have I been commanded this?’ (On hearing this) ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz exclaimed, ‘Mind what you are relating, O ‘Urwah! Is it the case that Gabriel it was
Evidence, upon I, Muhammad's struggle flexible defenders with left most he caliphal legislation approach. Sunnah "... the early Islamic literature strongly suggests that the Prophet was not a pan-legist. For one thing, it can be concluded a priori that the Prophet, who was, until his death, engaged in a grim moral and political struggle against the Meccans and the Arabs and in organizing his community state, could hardly have found time to lay down rules for the minutaie of life. Indeed, the Muslim community went about its normal business and did its day-to-day transactions, settling their normal business disputes by themselves in the light of common sense and on the basis of their customs which, after certain modifications, were left intact by the Prophet. It was only in cases that became especially acute that the Prophet was called upon to decide and in certain cases the Quran had to intervene... It was only on major policy decisions with regard to religion and state and on moral principles that the Prophet took formal action but even then the advice of his major Companions was sought and given publicly or privately" (Islamic Methodology, p. 11-2) In the same vein: "Was [the Sunna] something absolutely specific laying down once and for all the details of rules about all spheres of human life as Medieval Muslim Hadith-Fiqh literature suggests? Now, the overall picture of the Prophet's biography — if we look behind the coloring supplied by the Medieval legal mass — has certainly no tendency to suggest the imposition of the Prophet as a pan-legist neatly regulating the fine details of human life from administration to those of ritual purity. The evidence, in fact, strongly suggests that the Prophet was primarily a moral reformer of mankind and that, apart from occasional decisions, which had the character of ad hoc cases, he seldom resorted to general legislation as a means of furthering the Islamic cause." (Islamic Methodology, p. 10) From the last sentence it would appear that Rahman's moral hermeneutics has aided in the attainment of a clear view of the Sunna though it was the cause for much confusion in his view of the Quran. Liberals have a more flexible approach to the sources that tends to give them a sounder view of the Sunna as compared to conservatives (traditionalists, revivalists; see Chapter 1, endnote 63) who seem too rigid in their approach.

3 See Hallaq, Wael B. The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 43. "All other evidence from early sources appears to support the view that legal authority during the better part of the first Islamic century was in no way exclusively Prophetic. It must be remembered that by the time Muhammad died, his authority as a Prophet was anchored in the Quranic event and in the fact that he was God's spokesman — the one through whom this event materialized. To his followers, he was and remained nothing more than a human being, devoid of any divine attributes (unlike Christ, for instance). But by the time of his death, when his mission had already met with great success, he was the most important figure the Arabs knew. Nonetheless, these Arabs also knew of the central role that 'Umar I, Abu Bakr and a number of others had played in helping the Prophet, even in contributing to the success, if not survival, of the new religion. Like him, they were charismatic men who commanded the respect of the faithful (and in the case of 'Umar I, the ability to instill fear in his adversaries). Inasmuch as Muhammad's authority derived from the fact that he upheld the Quranic Truth and never swerved from it, these men — some of whom later became caliphs — derived their own authority as privileged Companions and caliphs from the same fact - namely, upholding the Quranic Truth. This is not to say that caliphal authority was necessarily or entirely derivative of that of the Prophet; in fact, it ran parallel to it. Muhammad was the messenger through whom the Quranic Truth was revealed — the caliphs were defenders of this Truth and the ones who were to implement its decrees."

4 In Chapter 2, I was deeply critical of Fazlur Rahman's Quranic hermeneutics. But here I am deeply impressed by his early proposal of a basically correct view of the Sunna. In a book first published in 1965 (Islamic Methodology in History), he very clearly articulates a view of the Sunna that has now been established by modern scholarship. As part of this view, he rejects the idea of the Prophet as a pan-legist: "... the early Islamic literature strongly suggests that the Prophet was not a pan-legist. For one thing, it can be concluded a priori that the Prophet, who was, until his death, engaged in a grim moral and political struggle against the Meccans and the Arabs and in organizing his community state, could hardly have found time to lay down rules for the minutaie of life. Indeed, the Muslim community went about its normal business and did its day-to-day transactions, settling their normal business disputes by themselves in the light of common sense and on the basis of their customs which, after certain modifications, were left intact by the Prophet. It was only in cases that became especially acute that the Prophet was called upon to decide and in certain cases the Quran had to intervene... It was only on major policy decisions with regard to religion and state and on moral principles that the Prophet took formal action but even then the advice of his major Companions was sought and given publicly or privately" (Islamic Methodology, p. 11-2) In the same vein: "Was [the Sunna] something absolutely specific laying down once and for all the details of rules about all spheres of human life as Medieval Muslim Hadith-Fiqh literature suggests? Now, the overall picture of the Prophet's biography — if we look behind the coloring supplied by the Medieval legal mass — has certainly no tendency to suggest the imposition of the Prophet as a pan-legist neatly regulating the fine details of human life from administration to those of ritual purity. The evidence, in fact, strongly suggests that the Prophet was primarily a moral reformer of mankind and that, apart from occasional decisions, which had the character of ad hoc cases, he seldom resorted to general legislation as a means of furthering the Islamic cause." (Islamic Methodology, p. 10) From the last sentence it would appear that Rahman's moral hermeneutics has aided in the attainment of a clear view of the Sunna though it was the cause for much confusion in his view of the Quran. Liberals have a more flexible approach to the sources that tends to give them a sounder view of the Sunna as compared to conservatives (traditionalists, revivalists; see Chapter 1, endnote 63) who seem too rigid in their approach.

5 See Rahman, Islamic Methodology, p. 182-5

6 Here again Rahman is on the button: "That the Prophetic Sunnah was a general umbrella-concept rather than filled with an absolutely specific content flows directly, at a theoretical level, from the fact that the Sunnah is a behavioral term: since no two cases, in practice, are ever exactly identical in their situational setting — moral, psychological, and material — Sunnah must, of necessity, allow of interpretation and
adaptation. But quite apart from this theoretical analysis, there is abundant historical evidence to show that this was actually the case. The letter of Hasan al-Basri mentioned previously is a glaring instance of this. In this letter, Hasan tells 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwan that although there is no Hadith from the Prophet in favour of the freedom of the will and human responsibility, nevertheless this is the Sunnah of the Prophet. What this obviously means is that the Prophet (and his Companions) have shown by their behaviour that the doctrine of predetermination contradicts the Prophet’s implicit teaching. This passage of Hasan is highly revelatory of the Prophetic Sunnah as being rather a pointer in a direction than an exactly laid-out series of rules, and demonstrates that it was precisely this notion of the “ideal Sunnah” that was the basis of the early thought-activity of the Muslims, and that imtiazh and ijma are its necessary complements and forward reaches in which this Sunnah is progressively fulfilled.” (Islamic Methodology, p. 12)

7 As discussed in Chapter 4: Section 2, the Shari’a includes both ritualistic and legal practice.
10 ibid., pp. 12-3
11 Hallaq, Origins, pp. 110-2

12 It is critical to understand the organic link between consensus, on the one hand, and sunnaic practice on the other. We can begin to do so by looking at an excellent analysis by Rahman on two senses in the early use of the word sunna: ‘Malik quotes a Hadith from the Prophet that the Prophet granted a certain person the right of shuf‘ah, i.e., the right of prior claim to purchase his partner’s share of the property, which this partner wanted to dispose of. Malik then observes, “And this is the Sunnah with us.” Then he says that the famous lawyer of Madinah, Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyib (d. ca. 90 A.H.) was once asked about shuf‘ah, “Is there any Sunnah concerning it?” Whereupon Ibn al-Musayyib said, “yes, shuf‘ah is applicable only to houses and land...” Now, it is a matter of importance to notice the obvious difference between the two usages of the term “Sunnah” in “This is the Sunnah with us” and “Is there any Sunnah with regard to shuf‘ah?” Whereas in the one case it does mean “the practice” or “established practice in Madinah” it cannot mean this in the second case, for one does not ask, in the face of an agreed practice: “Is there any Sunnah with regard to this?” In this case, then, Sunnah must mean an “authoritative” or “normative” precedent. But whose normative precedent? Obviously in this case the Sunnah is either the Sunnah of the Prophet or of any subsequent authority under the general aegis of the Prophetic Sunnah, for we have already adduced evidence that the pre-Islamic Arab practice as such cannot be regarded as normative. But whereas it is clear that the Sunnah is under the general aegis of the Prophetic model, it is also clear the Ibn al-Musayyib does not mention the Prophet here. And Malik quotes no Hadith, in this matter, from the Prophet on the authority of Ibn al-Musayyib. It is thus obvious that the Sunnah in question could have been set by any Companion or a subsequent authority although it is not divorced from the general concept of the Prophetic Sunnah. Further, what these two statements on Sunnah in this particular case of shuf‘ah conjointly imply is that Sunnah in sense (1) – an exemplary precedent, becomes, in Malik’s time, Sunnah in sense (2) – an agreed practice.’ (Islamic Methodology, pp. 13-4) The critical question is how does an exemplary precedent turn into an agreed practice? The answer is that a sunna (or for that matter a legal opinion (ra’iy)) comes to gain acceptance in a regional community and thus becomes an agreed practice. Rahman explains: ‘It should be abundantly clear by now that the actual content of the Sunnah of the early generations of Muslims was largely the product of Ijtihad when this Ijtihad, through an incessant interaction of opinion, developed the character of general acceptance or consensus of the Community, i.e. Ijma. This is why the term “Sunnah” in our sense (2), i.e. the actual practice, is used equivalently by Malik with the term “al-‘amr al-mujtama‘ ‘alayhi”, i.e. Ijma’. Thus, we see that the Sunnah and the Ijma’ literally merge into one another and are, in actual fact, materially identical.’ (Islamic Methodology, p.18) Forty years later, Hallaq articulates basically the same point: ‘The force of this sunnaic practice could not, however, be separate from the concept of consensus. The former could not have risen to paramountcy without unanimous or near-unanimous agreement, and this is precisely the phenomenon of consensus. Sunnaic practice therefore presupposed consensus. This is why we must insist that the second source of
second-/eighth century jurisprudence was a compound construct of sunnaic-consensual practice. It represented a unitary source that was almost invariably and often interchangeably expressed by both sunnaic and consensual terms, as evidenced in the aforementioned language of Malik’s *Muwatta*” (*Origins*, pp. 120-1)
11 Hallaq, *Origins*, pp. 120-1
14 Hallaq, *Origins*, p. 66
15 Ibid., p. 65
16 Ibid., pp. 106-7
17 Ibid., p. 63
18 Ibid., p. 64
19 Ibid. For Malik as the inheritor of Nafi’s teaching circle see Lucas, *Constructive Critics*, p. 128 (and footnote 42)
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 62
24 Rahman: ‘The necessary instrument whereby the Prophetic model was progressively developed into a definite and specific code of human behavior by the early generations of Muslims was responsible personal free-thought activity. This rational thinking, called “Ra’y” or “personal considered opinion” produced an immense wealth of legal, religious and moral ideas during the first century and a half approximately. But with all its wealth, the product of this activity became rather chaotic, i.e., the “Sunnah” of different regions – Hijaz, Iraq, Egypt, etc. – became divergent on almost every issue of detail.’ (*Islamic Methodology*, pp. 14-5)
25 Rahman: ‘An important feature of this Sunnah-ijma’ phenomenon must be noticed at this stage. It is that this informal *ijma* did not rule out differences of opinion. Not only was this *ijma* regional – the Sunnah-ijma’ of Madinah, e.g. differed from that of Iraq – but even within each region differences existed although an opinio generalis was crystallizing. This itself reveals the nature of the process whereby *ijma* was being arrived at, i.e. through differences in local usage and through different interpretations a general opinion publica was emerging, although at the same time the process of fresh thinking and interpretation was going on. This procedure of reaching *ijma* or a common public opinion was utterly democratic in its temper. But at this juncture also a powerful movement had gained momentum to achieve standardization and uniformity throughout the Muslim world.’ (*Islamic Methodology*, pp. 20-1)
26 Rahman: ‘But the notion of *ijma* exhibited by the early schools was very different. For them, *ijma* was not an imposed or manufactured static fact but an ongoing democratic process; it was not a formal but an informal, natural growth which at each step tolerates and, indeed, demands fresh and new thought and therefore must live not only *with* but also *upon* a certain amount of disagreement. We must exercise *ijtihad*, they contended, and progressively the area of agreement would widen; the remaining questions must be turned over to fresh *ijtihad* or *Qiyas* so that a new *ijma* could be arrived at.’ (*Islamic Methodology*, p. 23)
27 Auda, Jasser. *Maqasid al-Shari’ah as Philosophy of Islamic Law*, London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008, pp. 47-8: ‘Systems theorists differentiated between open and closed systems. ‘Living systems’ must be open systems, they maintained. This applies to living organisms as well as any system that is to ‘survive’. It was mentioned above that Bertalanffy linked the features of openness and purposefulness with his system feature of ‘equifinality’, which means that open systems have the ability of reaching the same objectives from different initial conditions via equally valid alternatives. These ‘initial conditions’ come from the environment. Thus, an open system interacts with the environment outside
the system, unlike closed systems which are isolated from the environment. The system of Islamic law is an open system in the above sense. A few jurists, however, are still calling for the ‘closure of the door of ijtihad (new juridical reasoning) on the usul (theoretical) level’, which would, effectively transform the Islamic law into a ‘closed system’, and which would eventually cause the Islamic law to ‘die’, to go along with the metaphor. However, all known schools of Islamic law and the vast majority of jurists over the centuries have concurred that ijtihad is necessary for the Islamic law because ‘(specific) scripts are limited and events are unlimited’.

22 Rahman: ‘With this background in view, we can understand the real force of the famous second-century aphorism: “The Sunnah decides upon the Qur’an; the Qur’an does not decide upon the Sunnah”, which, without this background, sounds not only shocking but outright blasphemous. What the aphorism means is that the Community, under the direction of the spirit (not the absolute letter) in which the Prophet acted in a given historical situation, shall authoritatively interpret and assign meaning to Revelation.’ (Islamic Methodology, pp. 19-20)


31 Common sense suggests that one of the greatest dangers in early Islam was the possible confusion of Prophet hadith with the words of the Quran. It was critical to draw an absolutely clear distinction between the words of God and the traditions of the Prophet and to give the latter a secondary status. The words of God were spoken by Him, while the traditions of the Prophet though possibly divinely inspired were, even so, only the words and actions of a man. The preoccupation of the early Muslims and the first Caliphs with the preservation of the Quran is well known. This preoccupation meant that anything other than the Quran was of secondary importance and could not be allowed to compromise the oral and written transmission of the Quran. This is most true in the critical period in which the Quran was being revealed and shortly thereafter. We learn of some sayings of the Prophet prohibiting the writing of his words and of the strong opposition to the writing of Prophetic tradition from three of the earliest collectors and redactors of the Quran, namely, Zayd ibn Thabit (d. 666, Medina), 'Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud (d.653, Kufa), and Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. ca. 662, Basra) (See Schoeler, Gregor, “Oral Torah and Hadith: Transmission, Prohibition of Writing, Redaction” in Motzki, Harald (ed.), Hadith, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004, p. 77).


Sayings of the Companions lend support to the prohibition on writing. When Abu Sa'id al-Khudri was asked to dictate tradition he replied: “Are you intending to create copies of the Qur'an from this? Your Prophet used to narrate things to us; thus you should [also] keep in your memory what you hear from us, just as we kept what we heard from your Prophet” (al-Baghdadi, Taqyid al-'ilm, pp. 36-8 as cited in Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 76; also Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, pp. 133-4). While Abu Burda (d. 722, Kufa) related of his father the Companion Abu Musa al-Ash’ari the following: "I copied many 'books' from my father, but he erased them all..." (al-Baghdadi, Taqyid al-'ilm, pp. 39-41 as cited in Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 87). Abu Musa al-Ash'ari reasons much in the same way as Abu Sa'id al-Khudri telling his son that "You have to memorize the traditions as we did when we heard them from the mouth of the Prophet" (Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p.133; Cook, Michael, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, Arabica, tome XLIV
(1997), p.477). In another tradition he says “The Israelites wrote (down) a book and followed it, abandoning the Torah” (al-Baghdadi, Taqyid al-‘ilm, p. 56b as cited in Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 501). Neither Companion is willing to depart from the practice of strict oral transmission of Prophetic tradition. The reasons given are that no writing should be produced that could possibly be mistaken for Quran and no document should exist that could become comparable to the Quran (Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 136; see also Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 491-2). A similar incident is reported about ’Abd Allah bin Mas’ud. When he learned that his son had written down a tradition from him he asked for the notebook and had the tradition destroyed (al-Baghdadi, Taqyid al-‘ilm, p. 39 as cited in Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 81; see also Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 482; for a similar incident see Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 133; for traditions of ‘Ali see Kister “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, pp. 132-3, 137 and Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 482-3).

Early Islam was basically a literate society in the sense that if something important had to be written you could always find someone to write it. Thus, the decision to transmit tradition orally had to be a self-conscious one for it demanded resisting the natural temptation to put everything useful down in writing. Michael Cook points to the peculiarity of failing to write tradition in a basically literate culture (Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 520-1). He makes a fair point given that even since the Prophet’s time (and because of his focus of literacy) Muslims had taken to writing like fish to water. It is against this background that we may see as peculiar the prevailing oral values vis a vis hadith transmission in early Islam (for prevailing oral values see Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 482 (including footnote 391)).

Cook offers considerable evidence that oral values prevailed in hadith transmission. He offers the examples of early authorities such as Ibn Mas’ud, al-Nakha’i, and Ibn Sirin who were strictly opposed to writing (Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 479, 481, 482-4). But Cook’s most important evidence is thematic. The evidence is that even the traditions favouring writing seem to assume a general background or theme of hostility to it. Thus, there are some famous traditions where Companions seek the Prophet’s permission to write his words implying that there was some sort of prohibition on writing tradition generally. Traditions from the Prophet tend to indicate that writing was a permission given when certain conditions applied. For example, al-Tirmidhi relates that an Ansarite Companion complained of his weak memory to the Prophet saying that he was unable to remember the Prophet’s salutary words and exhortations. The Prophet replied “Be helped by thy right hand” giving him permission to write (Tirmidhi, Sahih, ‘ilm 12 (=VII, pp. 311f, no. 2668) as cited in Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 485; see also Hamidullah, Muhammad, Sahifah Hammam Ibn Munabih, translated by Muhammad Rahimuddin, 10th Revised & Enlarged Edition, Hyderabad-Deccan: Habib & Co., 1979, p. 34). But why was such permission even necessary in a literate culture where one could naturally write down useful things one wanted to remember? From this Cook argues that there must have been a general prohibition on writing tradition.

32 Recall (from endnote 31) that the Companion Abu Hurayra transmitted a tradition from the Prophet against writing (“Do you wish for a book besides the Book of God?”). But he is said to have recounted “Amongst the Companions of the Prophet, there is none who recounts a greater number of hadith than myself, except for ‘Abdallah Ibn ‘Amr, who used to write them out (on the spot), but not so I” (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 35; Kister “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 128). So it seems that the Prophet did encourage some Companions to write. Looking at the Abu Hurayra traditions together, he seems to admit that the Prophet selectively gave permission to some Companions to write. As a youth ‘Abdallah b. ‘Amr b. al-‘As (referred to in the last Abu Hurayra tradition) had obtained the Prophet’s permission to write tradition but people dissuaded him from writing saying that the Prophet was but a human being subject to moods of anger and pleasure so that it was unfitting to record everything he said. ’Abdallah double checked with the Prophet saying “May I write down whatever I hear from thee?” He replied: “Yes.” ‘Abdallah persisted “On occasions both of pleasure and anger?” The Prophet pointed to his mouth and said “By God, whatever issues from this is verily right and truth” (Hamidullah, Sahifah, pp. 34-
5). That this permission was given more than one Companion is evidenced in the following tradition. "It is narrated by Abu-Qabil: one day we were with 'Abdullah b. 'Amr. He was asked: Which town would be conquered first, Constantinople or Rumia (Rome)? Upon this, he sent for an old box, and taking out a book from it, looked into it and said: one day we were (sitting) in the presence of the Holy Prophet and were writing down whatever he spoke. In the meantime, he was asked: Which town would be first conquered, Constantinople or Rumia? The Holy Prophet replied: the town of the son of Heraclius will be conquered first, - i.e. Constantinople" (taken from Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 36, italics added). This tradition clearly mentions that multiple persons were writing what the Prophet said.

It is reported that Abu Hurayra approached the Prophet when he began forgetting numerous utterances and the Prophet advised him: "Get help by your right hand." Thus, it appears that at some point Abu Hurayra did finally secure permission to write (Ibn Shahin, Nasikhul Hadith, 469, no. 625 as cited in Kister, "Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith", p. 130). In one tradition, Abu Hurayra gets into an argument with one of his pupils who claimed to have heard a certain tradition from him. Abu Hurayra says "If you did hear it from me then I'll have it written down at home" and takes the student to his house where he shows him many books of Prophetic traditions and also finds the tradition at issue (Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam", pp. 477-8). Hamidullah offers the plausible theory that the Prophet must have prohibited Abu Hurayra from writing in his early days as a Muslim when he just learning to write (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 7). This theory is plausible because it is in accord with the Prophet's practice of delegating critical tasks to those most suited for them. 'Abdullah b.'Amr b. al-'As was granted permission to write probably because he was young, intelligent, had a great passion for learning and had learnt the Syriac language, and regularly read the Bible having been, in this matter also, authorized by the Prophet to do so. Later, he even acquired a camel's load of Judeo-Christian books and having read them compiled a whole volume named the Sahifah Yarmukiyah (this apparently being the name of the place of battle where he got the books of Biblical lore in booty) (Hamidullah, Sahifah, pp. 36-7).

Another young man who wrote from the Prophet was his page Anas b. Malik who was ten when his parents sent him to serve the Prophet. Even at that young age he had learnt how to read and write. Anas was with the Prophet in his house for the last ten years of the mission and so had ample opportunity to observe and listen to him (Hamidullah, Sahifah, pp. 38-9). Hadith scholars relate the following on the authority of Anas' students: "When we used to press much - and in another version when we used to be numerous - Anas would take out notebooks and say: 'These are the traditions which I heard from the Holy Prophet and submitted for his perusal'" (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 39). Given Anas' association with writing and learning from such a young age it seems natural that the Prophet would select him for the task of writing traditions that, as the tradition attests, he would himself later review (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 39; Kister, "Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith", p. 129). Anas remained a proponent of writing traditions and would counsel his children: "O my children, write out this Learning (i.e. hadith)" (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 39). In Basra, where he migrated to around mid-7th century, he worked as a warraq (stationer, copyist and/or bookseller). He had a large following in Basra including the Sirin family whose son Muhammad Ibn Sirin became his secretary (Beeston, A.F.L. et al (eds.), Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, Chapter 11: "Hadith Literature – I: Acquisition and Transmission of Hadith", p. 290). Another Companion who wrote traditions and had a sahih was Jabir ibn 'Abdullah. The famous Basran traditionist and faqih Qatada used to say "I know the sahih of Jabir by heart even better than the second chapter of the Holy Qur'an (Surah Baqarah)" (Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 41; Kister, "Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith", p. 130).

'Ali also seems to be at the heart of the controversy of whether or not to write. In one case he says "People perished because they followed the traditions of their scholars and abandoned the Book of their God" (Kister, "Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith", pp. 132-3; Cook, "The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam", p. 483). This is close to 'Umar's views on redaction. Yet 'Ali is famous for having a sahiba from the Prophet which was rolled up and attached to a sword. As Hamidullah observes there is a good chance that the sahiba originally belonged to the Prophet and came into 'Ali's possession with the Prophet's sword that was found to be with 'Ali when the Prophet died (Hamidullah,
Sahifah, pp. 45-7; Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 483; Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 129). Bukhari reports that ‘Ali addressed the people from the pulpit with a sword girded to him that had a sahifah attached to it. He said “By God, we have no book with us for reciting save the Book of God (Qur’an) or whatever is to be found in this sahifah” (al-Bukhari, Sahih, 96: 5, (K. 91 ‘tisam bi’ll-kitab, B. ma yukrah min atta’ammuq), No. 2 as cited in Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 47). On another occasion when he was asked whether there was a book in his possession he replied “No, except the Book of God or such understanding as may be had by any Muslim, and whatever is in this sahifah” He would say that the sahifah contained prescriptions concerning the payment of bloodwit, the freeing of prisoners, and the order not to kill a Muslim for (the crime of) killing an unbeliever (Hamidullah, Sahifah, pp. 46-7; Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 129). On the whole ‘Ali and his followers were in favour of writing and this is also reflected in the fact that there is no evidence of the writing controversy in Shi‘ite sources. Hasan b. ‘Ali explicitly recommends to those who are unable to memorize tradition to write and Zayd b. ‘Ali (d. 122) writes tradition. Another tradition has two or three others of ‘Ali’s family write from Jabir b. Abdullah (Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 483). Once ‘Ali is said to have asked: “Who will buy tradition (‘ilm) from me for a dirham?” Harith b. Suwayd duly went and bought a dirham worth of writing sheets and returned to write tradition (Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 482).

34 There is of course a serious question here as to what the Prophet was trying to achieve by prohibiting the writing of tradition and at the same time allowing many Companions to write (for Hamidullah’s thought’s on the subject see Sahifah, p. 33-4). I believe that it is common sense to assume that he was trying to strike the right balance between non-discriminate transmission and no transmission at all. His solution seems to have been focused transmission via an elite group of hadith transcribers. In attempting to attain the balance he is seen as discouraging and warning some while encouraging and even supervising others. The traditions mentioned in endnotes 31-33 suggest that it was generally understood that writing was not allowed and special permission was needed to write. This comes across in a tradition where ibn ‘Umar is the youngest Companion present when Prophet threatens with Hell-fire anyone who reports a lie about him. Probably anxious to report accurately everything concerning the Prophet, ibn ‘Umar asks the older Companions present how a person can devote his energy to remember accurately what the Prophet says. The older Companions laugh knowingly at this and say ‘... everything we have heard from the Prophet is already recorded with us in writing’ (Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 128; for a tradition where it is not Ibn ‘Umar but rather ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amr asking the question see Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 477). Ibn ‘Umar’s ignorance that writing was allowed and the fact that he seems to have put the question to a group of Companions who already knew that it was the secret weapon of the accurate transmitter suggests that the Prophet had here addressed an elite core of hadith transmitters. The Prophet’s threat is aimed at stressing the need for accuracy in transmission. The severity of the threat could also indicate that he was addressing a core group of specialists whose business it was to preserve accuracy.

35 Some authors consider the possibility that the aversion to oral transmission may have been an extreme view and that the prevalent view may have been more moderate, viz. that the hadith should be the “oral doctrine” that accompanies the “written doctrine”, i.e., the Quran. See Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 81 and Cook, Michael, “‘Anan and Islam: the Origins of Karaite Scripturalism”, JSAI 9(1987), pp. 161-82. However, this view is not easy to reconcile with ‘Umar’s attitude to oral transmission as discussed in the next paragraph in the main text. Nor can such a view explain the common link (cl) phenomenon whereby transmission up to the generation of the Successors is most often based on a single chain of authority. Had oral transmission been prevalent, why would so many hadith have only a single transmission chain during the first half century or so?

36 The sunan referred to are basically the ways of the Prophet related in reports (hadith) about him (see Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 81). For ‘Umar, sunan may have been a more natural choice of words (as opposed to hadith) but for all practical purposes sunan and hadith are synonymous. The difference between sunan or hadith on the one hand and sunna on the other was already clarified earlier in the main text (in the second paragraph of this section).
There is also a report of ‘Umar writing to the garrison cities ordering them to erase written traditions. See Kister “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 135

Al-Dhahabi, Siyar a’lam al-nubala, II, 249; al-Dhahabi, Tadhkirat al-huffaz, I, 7 as cited in Kister “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 139

Al-Dhahabi, Siyar a’lam al-nubala, II, 433 as cited in Kister “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 135


For a detailed account see Hamidullah, Sahifah, p. 44.

Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 491, 521 (footnote 714)


G.H.A Juynboll’s research shows that the demand for the isnād or chain of transmission as a device to authenticate the Prophet’s true sayings began with the second fitna and this is further evidence that the large scale fabrication of hadīth began at that time (Juynboll, G.H.A., “Some notes on Islam’s first fuqaha’ distilled from early hadīth literature”, Arabica 39 (1992), Leiden: Brill, pp. 290-1; Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 71, Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, pp. 142-3). This is because only large-scale fabrication would have spurred Muslim society to demand greater formalism in the process of hadīth transmission especially with the new demand that each hadīth be accompanied with isnād or chains of transmission (Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 142; Juynboll, “Some notes on Islam’s first fuqaha’ distilled from early hadīth literature”, pp. 289-90). This demand for greater formalism was a critical first step in the journey to freedom in hadīth transmission.

Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 143

The fact that traditionists of the 3rd/9th century accepted only some four or five thousand hadīth as sound out of a corpus of over half a million indicates the vast extent of forgery.

Written transmission continued to be under a taboo for another half century, and in some places (e.g. Basra), for a whole century.


Beeston, Arabic Literature, p. 292

Ibid.

For reports concerning hadīth fabrication in Iraq see Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, pp. 144-5.

Beeston, Arabic Literature, p. 292

Ibid., p. 293

This is a reference to a complete collection of sunān and not a reference to our sought after concept of Sunna.

Beeston, Arabic Literature, pp. 293-4. See also Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, pp. 474-5.

Al-Buhkari, Sahih, 3: 34 (K. ‘Ilm, B. kaifa yuqbad al-‘ilm) as cited in Hamidullah, Sahifah, pp. 42-3, footnote 6
On completion of the project Zuhri informed his fellow tribesman, hadith scholar and judge Sa’d b. Ibrahim al-Zuhri (d.c.125/743), and when ‘Umar II sent copies of the finished product to the provinces Zuhri informed his pupil Uqayl b. Khalid. Another of Zuhri’s students, Malik b. Anas also reported knowledge of the project. See Beeston, *Arabic Literature*, p. 294 and Hamidullah, *Sahifah*, p. 43.

61 Beeston, *Arabic Literature*, p. 294

Ibid., p. 295


64 CuBeeston, *Arabic Literature*, pp. 295-6


66 Cook, “The Opponents of the Writing of Tradition in Early Islam”, p. 486

67 Schoeler, “Oral Torah and Hadith”, p. 85

Ibid. Schoeler conjectures that Zuhri may have done this to dissuade his Ummayyad patron from the project of codification.


77 Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 162. Zuhri also seems to have had a principled stand on the preservation of the *sunan* of the Companions as a source of law (the majority of his own *fiqh* is based on Companion reports (see Hallaq, *Origins*, p. 70)). He offered resistance to the growing pressure to make Prophetic *sunan* the exclusive source of Sunna. Sahih b. Kaysan who collected traditions with Zuhri considered it inappropriate to transmit the *sunan* of the Companions, as he did not see it as part of the Sunna. However, Zuhri wrote both the *sunan* of the Prophet and of the Companions to which Sahih commented later in life “He won the day and I lost” (Kister, “Some Notes on the Transmission of Hadith”, p. 136; Hallaq, *Origins*, p. 70). Thus, Zuhri seems to have been blessed with special insight on the issue of preservation of the Islamic sources of law.

78 Almost the same proportion is true of the *fiqh* of Qatada b. Diama, the scholar-courtier who had introduced Zuhri to the Umayyad court (see Hallaq, *Origins*, p. 75).

79 For a discussion on a similar distinction between *hadith* and Sunna see Dutton, *Origins*, pp. 169-70.


81 Later on, Shafi’i would insistently point out to the early schools: “You do not possess agreement (ijma’) but disagreement (ijtiraq)”. See Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, pp. 22-3

82 See endnote 25.
Khurasan, power, diminished.

and Islamic sunna genre” and jurists depend confirmed discussing its free judicial peculiarities, and orthodox to the Prophet proved more appealing as a material and textual source of the law than the living, sunnaic practice as defined by a specific city or legal community, since the latter had developed their own judicial and juristic peculiarities in keeping with their own particular environment. Prophetic hadith was free of these peculiarities, and was, as a textual entity, more amenable to use in new environments. Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and Damascus ceased to be the only major centers of the Muslim empire, and were rivaled, after the first century of Islam came to a close, by major new centers, such as those in Khurasan, Transoxiana, Egypt, and North Africa. Even the garrison towns finally succumbed to hadith, acknowledging that their doctrines could not continue to withstand the mounting pressure from this genre” (Shari’a, p. 58)

I thank my supervisor for pointing out on the basis of Nimrod Hurvitz’s work on the classical Hanbalia that ‘Hanbal traditionism was actually populist – and reflected in its support among the Baghdadi mob.’

Given the nature of the claims, the Caliph had evidently over reached himself and as the Inquisition ran its course it seems to have confirmed Sunni orthodoxy in the opposite direction, both the created Quran and the superiority of ‘Ali failing to become the orthodox view. More importantly, the failed Inquisition confirmed the authority of independent jurists to set the orthodox view.

I owe this point to the research of my colleague Omar Raza.

Raza proposed this theory based on the work of John Nawas that tracks the distribution of Muslim jurists and shows the sudden rise of the Shafi’i school after Ibn Hanbal and the Mihna. See John Nawas and Monique Bernards, “The Geographic Distribution of Muslim Jurists During the First Four Centuries”, Islamic Law and Society, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 168-81

See Melchert, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.

Lowry, Joseph, Early Islamic Legal Theory, Brill, 2007: “the whole concept of this work by Lowry is to discuss different terms invented by Shafi’i to present his Islamic legal theory”.

Melchert, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, pp. 80-1

Ibid, p. 11; Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law”, p. 396

Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law”, p. 396

Auda, Jasser. Masqasid al-Shari'ah as the Philosophy of Islamic Law, London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008, p. 190: “[Majeed] al-Sagheer proved that al-Shafi’i and other jurists proposed the fundamentals of Islamic law to ‘protect the law’ from the whims and personal interests of the ruling power, especially the Ummayyads, rather than enforce them.”

Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law”, pp. 389


83 Shafi’i bemoans this lack of unity saying that ‘no formal council of Muslim representatives to reach agreements had been ever convened nor was such a step feasible.’ See Rahman, Islamic Methodology, p. 22.

84 Hallaq, Origins, pp. 72-3

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., p. 108; Hallaq, Wael B. Shari’a: Theory, Practice, Transformations, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 47, 58. Hallaq: “The internationalization of legal scholarship – i.e., the intense geographical mobility of legal scholars within the wide expanse of Muslim territory, from Andalusia in the west to Transoxiana in the east – began early on, but became a truly normative practice by the end of the second/eighth century. And with this crucial phenomenon in place, loyalty to the sunnaic practice diminished. A scholar who traveled far and wide found variations in regional sunnaic practice difficult, if not impossible, to transpose. The Islamicization of such regions as Khurasan or Transoxiana could not depend on the sunnaic practices of the Kufans, Basrans, or Medinese. A universally transmitted hadith from the Prophet proved more appealing as a material and textual source of the law than the living, sunnaic practice as defined by a specific city or legal community, since the latter had developed their own judicial and juristic peculiarities in keeping with their own particular environment. Prophetic hadith was free of these peculiarities, and was, as a textual entity, more amenable to use in new environments. Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and Damascus ceased to be the only major centers of the Muslim empire, and were rivaled, after the first century of Islam came to a close, by major new centers, such as those in Khurasan, Transoxiana, Egypt, and North Africa. Even the garrison towns finally succumbed to hadith, acknowledging that their doctrines could not continue to withstand the mounting pressure from this genre” (Shari’a, p. 58)
Both theories are plausible. Shafi’i may have found himself at a loss for words against the arguments of the Kufan jurists Abu Yusuf and al-Shaybani. Following their teacher Abu Hanifa, neither would accept the authority of Medinese ‘amāl. If hadith were offered to them they would offer hadith from even higher authorities (Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law”, p. 390). An encounter between Abu Hanifa and the Syrian jurist al-Awzai illustrates what may have been a problem for Shafi’i in his interaction with Abu Hanifa’s students a generation later. When al-Awzai met Abu Hanifa in al-masjid al-haram (kaba in Mecca) he asked why the people of Iraq don’t do ra’f al-yadayn with ruku (Sarakshi, al-Mabsut, chapter 1 page 29). He offered Abu Hanifa a Medinese tradition from Zuhri from Salim that the Companion ‘Abdullah b. ‘Umar used to do the ra’f al-yadayn in this way. When Abu Hanifa replied that he had an Iraqi tradition from Hammad from Ibrahim from Alqama that the Companion ‘Abdullah b. Mas’ud did not do ra’f al-yadayn with ruku, al-Awzai expressed surprise that Abu Hanifa was willing to ignore the stronger Medinese isnad in favor of a weaker Iraqi one. Abu Hanifa responded that the men in his isnad were greater jurists (fuqaha) than those in the Medinese isnad and that ‘Abdullah b. Mas’ud’s status as a faqih and elder Companion far outweighed that of ‘Abdullah b. ‘Umar. From this encounter, it is reasonable to imagine that the only evidence that would have worked against the Iraqis is a marfu isnad going all the way back to the Prophet and perhaps this is precisely what Shafi’i came to realize. In fact, as we will see later in the main text, in his Muwatta’ Malik offers the Salim – ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar narration in favour of ra’f al-yadayn with ruku but only to reject it because it is not in keeping with Medinese ‘amāl. Thus, both Iraqi fiqh and Medinese ‘amal were against the ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar narration (but for very different reasons). Shafi’i would seem to be intent on resolving such issues for the sake of unity. Seeing that the Iraqis would not follow Medinese ‘amāl and that the only evidence that might sway them is a Prophetic hadith, Shafi’i goes with the Prophetic hadith against the positions of both Medina and Iraq. Shafi’i saw Prophetic hadith as the last word on any subject, the only source of law that can dispel all doubts and forge unity in the ranks of believers. Could this then be a glimpse into Shafi’i’s mind and the reason that he insisted on Prophetic hadith only?

Melchert’s second theory is that it was the need to respond to Quran-only scripturalists and their view of the higher inspiration of the Quran that motivated Shafi’i to emphatically proclaim the equal inspiration of the Prophet. It may be to this end that a belief was expressed (not necessarily by Shafi’i at first) that the Prophet had the Sunna directly from Gabriel (much in the same way that he got the Quran). In the 9th century, we find this in Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889-10) Ta’wil mukhtalif al-hadith. Melchert comments:

It was necessary to elevate the Prophet’s authority this way in order to defend the authority of the hadith-based rules against Qur’an-only rationalists. Of course, the same argument required that hadith from Companions be quietly discarded as a basis of the law, inasmuch as it was hard
to argue that hadith from Companions was also equally inspired with the Qur’an (Melchert, “Traditionist-Jurisprudents and the Framing of Islamic Law”, p. 404).

That Shafi’i was successful in making both moves (Sunna=hadith and only Prophetic hadith count) is a sure sign of deteriorating intellectual standards. The second move to restrict hadith to reports of the Prophet could have been questioned with great ease using Malik’s argument that Prophetic reports, even though they were authentic, did not reflect the Prophet’s practice at the end of his life. What the Prophet did in the final period of his life (especially his easily observable practices, for example, his manner of offering prayers) was reflected most truly in Medinese ‘amal. The obvious inference is that such questions were not being asked in hadith-only gatherings and peoples’ minds had ceased to break the mould of their indoctrination to ask even the most common sense questions.


Dutton, Origins, pp. 46-7

Ibid., p. 16

Ibid., p. 46

Ibid., p. 47 (footnote 94)

Ibid., pp. 35, 41

Ibid., pp. 35, 45

Ibid., p. 36

Ibid., pp. 42-3

Ibid., pp. 173-4

I owe this example to my late father-in-law, Ahmed Qaseem Usmani.

Dutton, Origins, p. 38

Ibid., pp. 36-7

Ibid., pp. 32-3

Shafi’i, Muhammad b, Idris, Kitab al-Umm, 1:82; 1:163; 2:125; 7:282

Dutton, Origins, pp. 37-9

Ibid., pp. 39-40

Ibid., pp. 170, 172, 176. Dutton: “What we see taking place outside Madina is a general shift away from ‘amal – that is, taking the din directly from people’s actions, on trust – to the need to support every doctrine with a valid textual authority, whether Qur’an or hadith. There was never any doubt amongst the ancient schools as to the authority of the sunna: what changed was the process whereby they arrived at establishing what that sunna was. Identifying the sunna with authentic hadiths from the Prophet began effectively with the Iraqis’ rejection of ‘amal – i.e. the ‘amal of Madina – as a source of sunna in favour of well-attested and generally accepted reports from either the Prophet or one of his senior Companions, and culminated in al-Shafi’i’s insistence that sunna could only be established by valid hadiths which went back to the Prophet and those alone” (Origins, p. 170). For the shift away from Medinese ‘amal to Prophetic hadith via Iraq see Ansari, Z.I. “The Early Development of Islamic Fiqh in Kufa, with Special Reference to the Works of Abu Yusuf and Shaybani”, unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University, 1968.

Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi’i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?”, pp. 591-2

Dutton, Origins, p. 172.

However, as Hallaq observes (Origins, pp. 47-50, 52, 56, 69-71, 78), a general movement towards making the Prophet the center of sunnaic authority had gathered considerable momentum well before Shafi’i’s time (see endnote 76).

Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi’i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?”, pp. 593

Ibid., p. 592

Ibid, pp. 597-8. For similar accounts of the traditionalism-rationalism synthesis see Hallaq, Shari’a, pp. 56-60 and Hallaq, Origins, pp. 122-8.

Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi’i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?”, p. 598
Joseph Lowry argues that Shafi’i should in an important sense be seen as a founder of *usul al-fiqh* because of his introduction of systematic terminology and methodology into hermeneutics. See Lowry, Joseph. *Early Islamic Legal Theory*, Leiden: Brill, 2007. This is one of the main purposes of Lowry’s work, another main purpose being to establish Shafi’i as the author of most of the *Risala*.

Hallaq, “Was al-Shafi’i the Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?”, p. 600

Dutton, *Origins*, p. 48

Ibid., p. 120

Ibid., p. 166

Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, p. 39

Abd al-Razzak, *Musannaf*, chapter 4 page 33

Ibid., 4:33

Dutton, *Origins*, p. 147

Razzak; 4:33

Dutton, *Origins*, p. 148

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 137

Abi Shayba, *Musannaf*, chapter 6 page 305; Razzak, 9: 383

Razzak, 9: 383-5; Sarakhshi, *Mabsut*, chapter 29 page 182
Appendix 3

The Nature of God

1. Introduction

In Chapter 1, I offered some important arguments for the existence of God that are founded on principles such as simplicity and sufficient reason that are truly deep features of human psychology. We also noted that there are limits to human knowledge. For this reason, our theistic arguments could never establish the existence of God as a deductive proof. I could spend the rest of my life offering theistic arguments without arriving at certain knowledge of His existence. So at least for the time being, I don’t want to do that. Given my epistemic limits, the path of deductive proof is a dead end and so I want to pursue a different line of reasoning. In other words, I suggest that we simply assume that a perfect being does exist, and move on to think about what else we could profitably talk about. In saying this, I am actually raising one of the central themes of this thesis. When we pursue any line of inquiry we invariably arrive at a dead end. This is because there are epistemic limits that enter upon the scene sooner or later. In such circumstances, it is often healthy and useful to change the topic. Often what we learn in another area of inquiry complements what we have learned in a previous one. It helps us to complete our picture of the world. And our most important choices are based on how this picture hangs together as a whole. We don’t make our deepest choices on the basis of deductive proofs.

None of this means that I should now start talking about the mating behavior of dance flies (interestingly enough, the male brings the female an insect and mates with her while she eats it). But a closely related question to that of God’s existence is that of His nature. If we could show that God’s nature is in harmony with everything else we know about the world then that would certainly complement the argument for theism. If God’s nature is something that we can easily understand then of course that would be a huge confirmation of the all too human belief in His existence. Children often believe that Santa Claus, dragons, and fairies exist because such characters are so believable. It is as easy to imagine a world with them as it is to imagine a world without. But notice one thing. All of these characters are imagined as physical beings. In the same way, if God were also a physical being then He would also be accessible to our imagination. In the Introduction and Chapter 1 (in the Argument from Nothing) I claimed that the perfect being has to be a physical being. Given that our conception of the perfect being is based on philosophy and science, it has to be a physical conception because there is no sense in which either philosophy or science can grasp nonphysical existence - existence with no basis either in physical space or physical energy. In contrast to an inconceivable nonphysical being, physical beings that are conscious and that have a causal impact on the world are part and parcel of common experience. For children, God could simply be a really big friend who has nothing particularly puzzling about Him, for example, He is neither nonphysical consciousness nor nonphysical agency. For adults, though, a physical God will have to be in some kind of sublime harmony with our physics, mathematics, and philosophy. For this reason,
I will attempt to establish that there is certainly no disharmony of the perfect being with what we have learned of the universe to date.

One of the key ideas guiding this inquiry into the physical nature of God is to be found in Morris’ response to the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) as articulated by William Mann. Mann derives the DDS from perfect being considerations. In his words:

The DDS . . . is motivated by the consideration that God is a perfect being, and that qua perfect, he must be independent from all other things for his being the being he is, and he must be sovereign over all other things. If God himself were composite, then he would be dependent upon his components for his being what he is, whereas they would not be dependent upon him for being what they are.\(^2\)

Thus, according to the DDS, God cannot have multiple properties as components of His nature because this implies that God is dependent on those properties. According to the DDS, ‘God is altogether without any sort of proper parts, composition, or metaphysical complexity whatsoever. As Mann now understands it, the doctrine precludes God’s having not only spatial and temporal parts, but also the presumed complexity which would result from his exemplifying multiple properties ontologically distinct from himself.'\(^2\) Morris explains the problem with an example:

If divinity is thought of as encompassing numerous, ontologically distinct properties such as omnipotence, omniscience and aseity, then God’s dependence on, for example, the property of omnipotence is apparently supposed to follow from its being the case that if God did not have that property, he would not be what he is (namely, omnipotent), or, assuming that he is essentially omnipotent, if omnipotence did not exist, or was not instantiated, God would not exist.\(^3\)

But Morris has a lucid solution to the dependence problem identified in the DDS. In his words:

Clearly, one could have a number of reservations about such an argument. For one thing, if God has the property of omnipotence essentially and necessarily exists (as the perfect being theologian standardly holds), then omnipotence has essentially the property of being instantiated by God. So if God did not exist, the property of being instantiated by God would not be instantiated and, since this is by supposition an essential property of omnipotence, then omnipotence would not be what it essentially is; that is to say, the property of omnipotence would not itself exist. If such per impossible reasoning gives us a dependence of God on omnipotence, it seems equally to yield a precisely similar dependence of omnipotence on God, contrary to what Mann claims. The argument was that if God were composite in the understood, and somewhat unusual, sense, a dependence relation would exist with God on the receiving end only, and that would conflict with his perfect independence. But the supporting form of reasoning fails to establish a solely one-way dependence relation. If God is composite or complex in virtue of having properties and he thus in some sense depends on his properties, they too depend in at least precisely the same sense on him. But is such a dependence in any case of a sort which would impugn the ontological independence almost any perfect being theologian would want to ascribe to God? I think not. From God’s having a property, it just does not seem to follow that he is ontologically dependent on that property. Otherwise, the property of ontological independence or aseity itself is in a good bit of trouble. It seems that all we have seen is that between God and any metaphysically distinct property essentially exemplified
by him, a mutual logical dependency will exist which is due to, or better, consists in, nothing more than the necessity of the relata on each side of the relation. Nothing clearly follows from God's merely having properties, and having properties essentially, which need be taken to impugn the ontological independence of divine perfection. Thus it is not clear on these grounds that perfection entails simplicity via asesity.  

In keeping with the spirit of Morris’ response, in what follows I will make a case for God’s causal dependence on energy, space and time, and in turn the causal dependence of each of these on God.

2. God, Energy, Thought

When we eat food we get energy. In turn, this energy gives us the power to think. I say that every thinking being needs energy to think, and, because God is a thinking being, He also needs energy to think. God is not like us because He does not need food but He is like us in that He needs energy to think. I hold that the following conditional is true:

1. If thought then energy

This means that the existence of energy is a necessary condition for the existence of thought. This goes against the traditional theistic conception that divine thought has no basis in anything physical (including physical energy). In the animal kingdom, some of the energy an organism acquires from food is stored in the physical matter of the brain and this supplies power for animal thought processes. I say that God is not like animals in this respect and that He has no physical matter and thus no brain. For me, while the sense in which God is physical is that He has a basis in matter-energy if you push me on that point then I will say that He has a basis only in energy. Energy is one of the constituents of God. In 1, I have already implied that as a thinking being God needs energy. The following conditional makes that explicit:

2. If God then energy

This means that the existence of energy is a necessary condition for the existence of (any thinking being including) God. Take this last conditional to say that God has a causal dependence on energy. Of course, such dependence is hardly fitting for a perfect being. To fix this problem, I propose a third conditional:

3. If energy then God

On the face of it, this seems to be a very controversial thing to say. How is God a necessary condition for the existence of energy? Surely we can imagine a world without God that nonetheless has plenty of energy. However, perhaps on second thought it is not such a controversial statement after all. This is because if we hold dear the principle of sufficient reason (p then Sp) then we must accept that if there is energy then there has to be a sufficient reason for its existence. What is being said in 3 is only that in some sense it is necessary that God be the sufficient reason for the existence of energy.
But let’s not worry about the modal logic of 3 because what I’m doing here is something much simpler. We may hope that our philosophical degrees of freedom are much greater now that we have changed the topic from theism to a discussion of divine nature. All that I am now doing is constructing an anatomy of God that will be in harmony with our ways of thinking about how the world works. To this end, I am at liberty to be far bolder and more direct in my proposals in support of 3. With that in mind I make the following claim: *it is God’s thought that generates all the energy that exists and so of course there would be no energy without God.* For this reason, 3 is a necessary truth. You should say “What a nut case! How can non-physical thought generate physical energy?” And I should accept both your exasperation and query as legitimate except for one thing that I must point out. I must point out that I am not saying anything new because it happens all the time. Even as I type these words, my non-physical thought is generating enough physical energy to initiate a physical psychochemical process that gets my fingers to merrily strike away at the keyboard. So the notion that non-physical thought generates physical energy is actually quite commonplace. And with that observation, we suddenly find ourselves being parachuted into the middle of a philosophical killing field. This is the debate on free will and consciousness.

Before we enter the war zone and lose recollection of all things proper, allow me a last chance at clarifying what I take the overall relation of God and energy to be. Energy is the causal basis for divine thought processes. However, this does not mean that energy, as the causal basis of God’s thinking, is the ultimate reality above and beyond God. Energy itself depends on divine thought for its existence because divine thought is the ultimate source of all energy. In the end, what we have is the following bi-conditional:

4. Energy if and only if divine thought

As a result, the following relations can be claimed and are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

A. All energy is causally dependent on divine thought.
B. Divine thought is causally dependent on some energy.
C. All energy is causally dependent on God (this follows directly from A and E and F).
D. God is causally dependent on some energy (this follows directly from B and E and F).
E. God is logically dependent on His thought.
F. God’s thought is logically dependent on Him.

![Figure 1](image-url)
Free Will and Consciousness

The aim of this subsection is to establish that non-physical thought generates physical energy. An excellent example of the non-physical/physical interface is given by pain. After deploying the matter-energy of our nervous systems in order to explain all the physical processes that give rise to pain there is still something left to be explained. No matter how deeply we study pain as neuroscientists we cannot give a complete account of it merely in physical terms. Beyond the physical basis for pain lies something non-physical. This is because there can be no physical account of the way we feel when we feel pain. The conscious feeling is a further fact, a non-physical fact, and even (as I will argue) a meta-physical fact. There is a causal chain that runs from the physical to the non-physical and back to the physical. I pinch you. That is physical. You feel pain. That is non-physical. You wince and/or say ‘ouch!’ That is physical. Thus, the physical pinch causes the non-physical feeling of pain that in turn causes the physical behavior (wincing and/or saying ‘ouch!’). If a non-physical feeling can cause a physical behavior then surely a non-physical thought can cause a physical action. For a non-physical feeling or thought to cause a physical event such as an exclamation or an action, it must generate physical energy. In this subsection, this is precisely the result we establish. It is a result that demonstrates how divine thought could generate all the physical energy that exists. But we will begin our exploration from a point that could be seen to be the beginnings of the modern debate.

Descartes

Rene Descartes must have thought it obvious that there is some aspect of a human being that is non-physical. The human attributes of free agency and conscious experience are, even in our age, well beyond the reach of purely physical explanation. As it happens, Descartes offered a very weak argument in defense of this clear intuition. His famous argument was that an evil demon could be deceiving him about all his perceptions and thoughts. Such universal deception would include deception about the physical body. In modern times, the evil demon is replaced by an evil neurosurgeon. He kidnaps you in your sleep, removes your brain from your skull placing it in a vat, and then hooks it up to a supercomputer that generates a virtual reality so that your brain doesn’t know the difference. You wake up and use your legs to walk to the window in your room for a view of the sunrise. But it is all deception because you don’t have a leg to stand on, you are not in your room, and you can’t see the sun. You are just a brain in a vat. This was the first premise of Descartes’ argument⁵, namely, that he could imagine that his body was a mere deception. The second premise was that even though he could be deceived about his body, he could not possibly be deceived about himself. The body could imaginably be a deception, but I (or the self) could not be a deception because if there were no me then there would be no one to deceive. Deceived or not, I exist because I perceive and think (I think, therefore I exist). Here is the whole argument with the two premises followed by the conclusion.

A. I can imagine that the body is a deception
B. I cannot imagine that the self is a deception
C. Therefore, the self is distinct from the body.
This is Descartes’ argument for the dualism of mind and body. Through this argument, Descartes was establishing a fact about the world, namely, that mind and body are distinct entities. For Descartes, the body could be a deception along with all other material objects. However, the mind could not be a deception and so must be distinct from the body and all other material objects. Therefore, mind and body are distinct and the mind is immaterial. It is a poor argument because Descartes has arrived at a conclusion about what is actual based merely on his ability to imagine things. We may ask how Descartes’ imaginings change ground realities in any way. That he can imagine that his body is a deception does not mean that it is in fact a deception. Only if his body were in fact a deception would there be a distinction between mind and body because the mind would exist while the body would not. However, if his body is not in fact a deception then there is always the possibility that there is no distinction between mind and body because both mind and body are material. Because Descartes’ imaginings in no way rules out the possibility that both mind and body are material, his argument is invalid.

Another way to see the problem is to assume that it is a brute fact that the mind and body are not distinct in the actual world. Enter Descartes, who can imagine that his body is a deception but cannot imagine that his mind is one. On the basis of this, Descartes wants to conclude that the mind and body are actually distinct but according to our assumption they actually are not. What this shows is that Descartes’ imaginings are not so persuasive as to challenge our assumption. His argument has not shown our assumption to be false for it has not eliminated the possibility that neither the mind nor the body are deceptions and that they are not distinct from each other. The point is that Descartes’ imaginings will not make any difference to the facts on the ground. If in fact the body and mind are not distinct, Descartes’ imaginings will not change that fact. By the same token, if in fact the body and mind are distinct, Descartes’ imaginings do not establish that fact. Thus, Descartes’ argument cannot establish a fact about the world such as mind/body dualism. However, this is precisely what it aims to do and that is basically the problem with it.7

Free Will to the Rescue

While Descartes’ argument for dualism is invalid, this does not mean that his basic intuition is wrong. His intuition is that there is a non-physical dimension to the human mind.8 We have to consider whether there are other more potent ways to express that intuition. One of the most potent expressions of that intuition is the incompatibility of physical laws and free will. Physical laws are either deterministic as in classical physics or randomly in-deterministic as in quantum mechanics. According to classical physics, all things are part of a nexus of causes and effects so that if we had knowledge of the condition of the universe at a given time (positions and velocities of all particles), and of the operative physical laws, then we could predict all future states of the universe. This would include predictions of all future human actions. We would thus be in a deterministic universe where all human actions were purely the effects of antecedent causes. In other words, our actions would not be up to us in any real sense because they would be pre-determined by the laws of classical physics. The psychological laws that produce human actions would be explained at a deeper level by physical laws, and no matter how free we may feel from a psychological standpoint, all of our psychology and behavior (including ‘voluntary’ action) would be determined by the underlying laws of physics.
Of course, things are no better (they are probably worse) when we remember that the universe is randomly in-deterministic, as it is according to quantum mechanics. In a world governed by random quantum events, it may initially come as a relief that we are not part of a deterministic causal nexus. This means that it is not possible to predict future states of the universe (and by Heisenberg uncertainty it is in any case not possible to know the present state of the universe) and so it is not possible to predict future human actions. This may have a good ring to it but bodes evil for free agency. Quantum events are purely random and banish any residual possibility that our actions are in any real sense up to us. If the statistical laws of quantum mechanics underlie human psychology, then while our actions become unpredictable, there is no possibility that they are free. The classical tyrant is determinism, but the quantum tyrant in randomness.

It is this incompatibility of physics (classical or quantum) and free will that motivates the view that there is something beyond physics that is at work in the human mind. The theory that human beings have free will is a meta-physical theory. It is the theory that there is a nonphysical dimension in human mentality. However, it is not only a metaphysical theory. It is also a powerful phenomenological theory. Very few people are willing to falsify the common feeling of being the final arbiters of their actions. It is the feeling that it is self-evident that we are free agents, and only the rare individual abandons it in favor of the view that we are automaton operating on the basis of psychophysical laws beyond our control. This deep phenomenological argument is fortified by another deep and widespread feeling that we are moral agents and that the basis of moral responsibility is free action. If our actions are not free then why should we be seen as responsible for them in any deep way? If everything we do is the result of antecedent physical laws and causes or of random fluctuations in a quantum mind then it is really not possible to understand why we are ultimately responsible for our actions. It is only because we freely choose between genuine alternate possibilities of action that we are morally responsible for what we do. But the only way to have the desideratum of rich freedom and ultimate responsibility is to nurture the Cartesian intuition of the non-physicality of the human mind. In some way, whatever that may be, the human mind transcends physical law.

Nietzsche’s Assault on Free Will

The best champion for a savage counter attack on the Cartesian intuition just articulated is undoubtedly Nietzsche. He unleashes two potentially lethal arguments against free will. The first is that if human decision making is outside the causal physical nexus then we have on hand something (human will) that is causa sui or self-caused. The problem with this is that it may not make any sense. Can there be such a thing that is its own cause? Nietzsche:

The causa sui is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic; but the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for “freedom of the will” in the superlative metaphysical sense... the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one’s actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this causa sui and... to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. (BGE: 21)
In order to understand the weight of this assault on free will we must keep in mind that, as a psychologist, Nietzsche is one of the most astute to have ever lived. In this passage, he is drawing attention to an inbuilt human need for self-importance. This is the reason we historically placed ourselves at the top of the natural order of living things and placed our Earth at the centre of the universe. We are blindly driven to pull ourselves out of the ‘swamps of nothingness’. But in contrast to our fantasies of self-importance, the stark Nietzschean truth is that we are simply dominoes in a causal nexus and nothingness is precisely our fate. Our real problem is that we do not have the psychological fortitude to accept this fact. As a result – and this is the thrust of the passage - we deceive ourselves in the face of overwhelming logical evidence to the contrary. We believe that we have a rich freedom that grounds a deep moral responsibility. We are so arrogant as to believe that our choices matter and this is why we keep insisting that they are free. Nietzsche’s pre-occupation is with the common cultural thought and practice of his fellowmen (rather than with the views of philosophers and academics) and through such writing he is offering shock therapy for a culture in decay. Why any of this should matter to Nietzsche or why he should care about the decay of culture given the austere brand of deterministic fatalism he subscribes to is something of a mystery. Maybe he felt that it was pre-determined that he would offer such therapy to his fellowmen.

The second argument against free will is basically the flip side of the first. As there can be no such thing as a self-caused agent or act, everything that we do is a result of psychophysical facts about us, it is the result of ‘God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society’. It is physiological and psychic traits, and unconscious drives and effects that determine who we are and what we do (herein lies the starting point of Freudian psychology). The basic point is that consciousness has no meaningful causal role to play in the determination of human action and the construction of human personality. Even if consciousness is part of the causal chain that leads to decision-making, its role is pre-determined by psychophysical traits. Consciousness exercises no real freedom and does not change or determine anything. It is a secondary mental phenomenon caused by physical brain processes but one that has no causal influence itself. In other words, consciousness is epiphenomenal. Nietzsche:

People are accustomed to consider the goal (purposes, volitions, etc.) as the driving force [behind actions], in keeping with every ancient error; but it is merely the directing force – one has mistaken the helmsman for the steam. Is the ‘goal’, the ‘purpose’ not often enough a beautifying pretext, a self-deception of vanity after the event that does not want to acknowledge that the ship is following the current into which it has entered accidentally? that it “wills” to go that way because – it must? that it has a direction, to be sure, but no helmsman at all? (GS: 360)

The passage begins on the relatively hopeful note that while consciousness should not be mistaken for the driving force - the steam - it is at least a directing force - the helmsman. But there is immediate rapid descent into deep skepticism and the goals, intentions, and purposes that human beings give themselves are seen as a ‘beautifying pretext’, a story that we tell ourselves because we cannot come to terms with the fact that all of our actions are, in fact, accidental. Our ship is ‘following’ a current into which it has entered accidentally and we do the things we do because we must - because we could not do otherwise. To claim that are actions are free (based on free intentions and purposes) and that we are responsible for them
is ‘a self-deception of vanity’. The fact is that there is no helmsman but we cannot face that fact and so we deceive ourselves into imagining that we are at the helm.

Nietzsche’s profoundly austere conclusion is that the conscious self of a human person has no role to play in the process of decision making. It exercises no control over the unconscious forces that drive and direct human thought and action. As Leiter explains Nietzsche’s view:

[A certain author] describes an account of agency in which there is, in fact, no autonomous agent as one in which “the person merely serves as the arena for [certain] events: he takes no active part”... But we have now seen clearly that this is precisely Nietzsche’s view. A “person” is an arena in which the struggle of drives... is played out; how they play out determines what he believes, what he values, what he becomes. But, qua conscious self or “agent”, the person takes no active part in the process.\textsuperscript{14}

The construction of human character is not a consciously driven process. The person does not choose to become what he is. Even his desire to improve himself, to become a better person, is just another ‘beautifying pretext’. Self-mastery and self-improvement, the desire to overcome vehement drives (gluttony, greed, lust, etc.) is merely a pretense and facade of other drives that may be even more vehement than the first. These other drives treacherously use morality as a weapon to vanquish their competitor drives (gluttony, greed, etc.). Nietzsche:

\[T\]hat one wants to combat the vehemence of a drive at all, however, does not stand within our power; nor does the choice of any particular method; nor does the success or failure of this method. What is clearly the case is that in this entire procedure our intellect is only the blind instrument of another drive, which is a rival of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us... While “we” believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive \textit{which is complaining about the other}, that is to say: for us to become aware that we are suffering from the vehemence of a drive presupposes the existence of another equally vehement or even more vehement drive, and that a \textit{struggle} is in prospect in which our intellect is going to have to take sides. \textit{(D: 109)}\textsuperscript{15}

Keep in mind that when the intellect ‘takes sides’ it is merely functioning as ‘the blind instrument of another drive’. Nietzsche is basically offering us an alternative worldview. It is a view that is anathema to what nearly all human cultures and religions have held to date. But however unsavory it may be, it is a view that could conceivably be defended in philosophy, as long as one consistently maintains a deep level of skepticism about the human condition.

What is much harder to defend in philosophy is a halfway house between Descartes and Nietzsche. Descartes should be seen to uphold that free will is not compatible with physics. This is why he argues for free will and for the non-physicality of mind. Nietzsche should also be seen to uphold that free will is not compatible with physics. This is why he argues against free will and for the physicality of the mind. For over three decades, some philosophers have maintained (against both Descartes and Nietzsche) that free will \textit{is} compatible with physics (deterministic or in-deterministic). In saying this, it is not their intention to argue for a different paradigm for physics, one in which things are less causally determined or less randomly indetermined. The tyranny of determinism and in-determinism over the physical world is as oppressive as ever. Consciousness continues to have no control over the physical laws that
give rise to it. The difference is that they argue that we should content ourselves with a shallower view of human freedom. Compatibilists, as such philosophers are called, believe that we have all the freedom we need as long as we identify with the motivations, pro-attitudes, and other desires that produce action. While they accept that such motivations, pro-attitudes, and desires are causally determined or randomly in-determined, our identification with them gives us a sort of ownership of the decision making process and this feeling of ownership is all the freedom we should ask for. According to the laws of physics we are still automatons, but we should feel comfortable with that as long as we identify with the motivations that mould our character and determine our actions. Identification gives us ownership and thus a reasonable feeling of freedom. For example, I have a desire to buy a gas guzzling SUV and drive cross country every month. This desire competes with (and is at odds with) another desire to conserve energy and preserve the natural environment. Let’s call these first order desires. The way that I resolve the conflict between these first order desires is by recourse to what may be called a second order desire. Let’s say that I have a second order desire to uphold aesthetic values. Because of this second order desire, I decide in favor of conservation of resources and preservation of nature. I don’t purchase the SUV. Compatibilists argue that I should see this as a free choice because it is one that I identify with given that I identify with the second order desire to uphold aesthetic values. My identification with the second order desire that determined my choice is what has made this a free choice. All the while, they acknowledge that my second order desire for aesthetic values is really not up to me in any real sense because of underlying psychophysical realities. For all intents and purposes, both the origin of this second order desire and my identification with it are beyond conscious control. But now this poses a problem for the compatibilist. After all, if both the second-order desire and my identification with it are beyond conscious control then in what sense is my decision free? This is why it is very difficult to see compatibilism as a viable philosophical position. Had my second order desire been different, if it had been the desire to live life to the fullest, I would have purchased the SUV and indulged my cross country fantasies. According to compatibilists, because I would identify with the second order desire to live life to the fullest such a decision would be free. But, as they readily acknowledge, there is no getting away from the psychophysical laws that generate such a second order desire and cause me to identify with it. That is where the buck stops. It is the psychophysical laws that determine whether I go cross country in a brand new SUV or for a walk in the neighborhood park instead. So I don’t see how compatibilism sheds light on the debate in any meaningful way.

Nietzsche, Dennett Foiled

In our times, Daniel Dennett is a philosopher who has staunchly defended a Nietzschean view of free will. He has used evidence from experimental psychology to defend his position though his use of evidence is selective. An example of such evidence is an experiment conducted by neurosurgeon Benjamin Libet. In this experiment, Libet observes the timing of a sequence of events leading to simple actions, say, for example, raising the arm. The sequence of events one expects to find is 1) a person makes a decision to raise his arm 2) the brain sends an electrical command to the muscle 3) the muscle begins to contract in order to raise the arm. Surprisingly, Libet discovered that the order of the sequence is not 1-2-3 as expected but rather 2-1-3. The brain sends an electrical command to the muscle as much as half a second
before the experimental subject consciously decides to raise his arm! This suggests to Libet that the conscious mind is made aware of an action after the body is already engaged in that action. Consciousness gets the information too late to do anything about it. The experiment evokes Nietzsche’s image of the ship accidentally entering into a current with the deluded helmsman feeling that he has directed it thus. The electrical command is already on its way before the conscious person discovers that he is raising his arm. Later, he assures himself that this is what he had decided to do. Many similar observations and experiments confirm the view that the mind operates on automatic pilot and that consciousness (the manual pilot) is not part of the decision making process. For example, the McGurk effect demonstrates that the mind automatically adjusts the words we hear to fit the visual image of the speaker’s lip synching. 18 A person viewing a film may unconsciously override the actual sound track because of the lip movements he observes. Characters may utter words here and there that are different from what we hear because vision automatically overrides hearing in this case. The mind does this on its own without informing us that the speaker did not actually say some of the words that we heard.

From such experimental observations, Dennett draws the conclusion that consciousness is causally inefficacious and epiphenomenal. This is a frightfully hasty conclusion. Even if we use only Dennett’s selective evidence but adopt instead a rigorous and impartial scientific view of it the only conclusion we can draw is that there is much automaticity in the mind (rather than the more sweeping conclusion that consciousness is epiphenomenal). The automaticity conclusion is not at all surprising because without automaticity the conscious mind would be very inefficient. 19 Consider an analogy. The CEO of a company has to micromanage daily operations even to the extent of having to supervise photocopying, printing, and courier services. This is clearly a very inefficient company with the energies of its top strategic planner (CEO) being dissipated in routine functioning. By analogy, if the brain were to call in its CEO (consciousness) even for the smallest mechanical jobs it would not be the efficient intellectual powerhouse that it is. Of what service could it possibly be to efficiency for a human being to become conscious of the McGurk effect? It is a whole lot more efficient for the brain to solve that problem at a lower level without involving the top executive. This is precisely what happens. The brain solves the problem by prioritizing vision over hearing so that we get the gist of what the speaker is saying at the petty cost of hearing some words that he did not actually speak. Truly an efficient and practical solution if ever there was one. Similarly, Libet’s experiment is another demonstration of the brain’s efficiency. Instead of waiting for the conscious person to decide to raise his arm, the brain sends the electrical command ahead of time. If half a second later the conscious person decides that this is not such a good idea (maybe because he forgot to apply deodorant) then he can simply choose to lower his arm again. The point is that many of our actions, gestures, and body language are not consciously pre-planned. Consciousness enters at a later (intermediate) stage and plays the role of editor. Consciousness edits our natural and spontaneous repertoire of actions. If a gesture is too effeminate or a posture is too uncouth, consciousness plays the role of critic and editor. Libet’s experiment is too close for comfort to established phenomena such as reflex action. My hand moves to scratch an itch without informing the conscious mind. If I am in company I may choose to redirect the hand (pretending that I was changing posture or something rather than scratching an itch). The unconscious mind does a lot of secretarial work for the conscious mind. It throws up all sorts of suggestions for action. It even has a free hand to initiate a range of actions. As I get up to leave your office, we are engrossed in conversation but I
unconsciously reach for the door and open it. Later on, I have forgotten whether I picked up my keys from your desk (though unconsciously I did) and when I check my pockets I am thankful that I have everything. So the top executive (consciousness) delegates responsibility in an efficient way as possible while at the same time reserving the right to give a final and considered decision on every matter. During the process of learning an activity such as driving or playing the piano, the conscious mind is directly involved. This is analogous to the CEO of a company being directly involved in new projects. But as the activity becomes learned and habitual the conscious mind turns to other matters that need direct attention. Thus, driving and playing the piano can become unconscious activities that require little conscious supervision. This is precisely what efficiency demands. But consciousness can always choose to intervene in the activity (for example, to improve it) whenever it sees fit.

The same basic point can be made about the automaticity of language. Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor convincingly established that there is a language module in the brain that, for example, allows for the automatic learning of grammar in children. Children are known to acquire grammar rapidly without specific instruction or much conscious attention. In this sense, the acquisition of grammar has more in common with the acquisition of vision because the latter is obviously based in an unconscious module that performs all the underlying computations for sight below the level of conscious awareness (for example, the conscious mind is not made aware of the fact that the eye constantly jiggles in its socket because the vision module has already made all the necessary adjustments in the unconscious realm before passing on a stable picture to conscious awareness). Given the language module, it would appear that one of the main would be arbiters of higher consciousness, namely language, is actually an automated (rather than a conscious) function. What better argument for the epiphenomenal nature of consciousness than that one of its chief bulwarks (language) is an automated module. Let’s say that those who advance epiphenomenality on the basis of language modularity belong to the language-is-a-module camp. Much phenomenology is advanced in support of their position such as the fact that we do not consciously generate the sentences we think or speak. ‘Grammar usually does its work unconsciously, and we are generally not aware of its action, either when we construct sentences or when we parse the sentences of others.’ As Leiter comments, Nietzsche is in full agreement with this basic theme.

[Neitsche’s] strongest argument for the epiphenomenality of the mental is the following phenomenological argument against the causal autonomy of consciousness: namely, “that a thought comes when ‘it’ wishes, and not when ‘I’ wish” (BGE: 17)

Thus, Nietzsche’s main phenomenological evidence against giving consciousness a functional role in cognition is basically the same as that of our language-is-a-module camp. Merging Nietzsche and the language-is-a-module camp we can assert this phenomenological argument in the following way. Common experience shows that thought and language are generated in the unconscious (in mechanistic brain modules). Consciousness has no causal role to play in the generation of either. Therefore, it is epiphenomenal. But as we have seen, this is a very weak argument. Take the case of language. While it is probably true that a language module generates our sentences, this is hardly sufficient basis to deny consciousness any causal role. We have already seen that consciousness plays a critical role as editor. While the unconscious secretary may generate sentence drafts, it is the conscious CEO that edits and approves them.
This is clearly true of my own mind even as I write these sentences. The unconscious mind offers a workable suggestion for my next sentence and I will very often type it in. But equally often I will be unsatisfied with what I have typed and I will edit or delete the sentence. The decision to change the sentence is a conscious one. It may well be that the replacement sentence is also unconsciously generated. But as far as the acceptance or rejection of a sentence is concerned, this being among other things an aesthetic choice, it is very hard to feel of such a choice that it is an unconscious one. The sentences in which we finally choose to express our thoughts and the thoughts that we choose to nurture and that ultimately mould our character are - from a purely phenomenological viewpoint - a result of conscious choice. Given this last self-evident observation on the phenomenology of consciousness, the phenomenological argument of Nietzsche and the language-is-a-module camp does not even get off the ground.

Pain for Freedom

The most penetrating and convincing argument for the causal efficacy of consciousness probably emerges from a consideration of sensory experience. It is self-evident that sensations such as pain are conscious experiences that have immediate phenomenological properties. Whatever the physical basis of pain may be, conscious awareness of it is a non-physical event. Conscious experience of sensations such as pain is a further fact about them after all physical explanations of them are exhausted. In this, pain is no different from all other sensory experiences, for example, of secondary qualities such as color, sound, taste, and heat. While sensory inputs and processes undeniably have a physical basis, it is equally undeniable that conscious sense experience is a non-physical phenomenon. In being forced to accept this self-evident point, the assault on consciousness led by Nietzsche, is considerably weakened. This is because such acceptance is actually an admission that there is a causal connection between the physical and non-physical realms. I pinch you, a signal is transmitted to your brain and you feel pain. The physical event of pinching leads to a non-physical feeling of pain. The admission that there are connections between the physical and non-physical realms opens the door for the obvious suggestion that these are not one-way connections. If a causal chain can run from the physical world to a non-physical realm of feeling, then the chain can also run the other way. Let’s continue with the pinching. I pinch you. A signal is sent to your brain. You feel pain. Then you wince and/or say ‘ouch!’ The physical pinching leads to a non-physical feeling of pain that in turn leads to a physical behavior (wincing and/or saying ‘ouch!’). So we now have a causal connection running from the physical to the non-physical and back to the physical. The phenomenological foundation of this reasoning is unquestionable. But still, is it really true? If it is, then the non-physical consciousness of pain is a cause for the physical occurrence of an action (wincing) and/or an exclamatory sound (‘ouch!’). Consciousness is causally efficacious.

Nietzsche’s followers must find a way to deny the compellingly obvious nature of the story in the last paragraph. Of course they have found a way, though, as expected, it is not at all persuasive. Their way is to offer a physicalist and functionalist theory of pain. According to this theory, pain is defined as the internal state that is caused by injury and damage and that in turn causes us to behave in certain ways, for example, rub the affected spot, avoid repeating the damage, groan and weep, and so on. According to the functionalist, as long as we are injured or damaged and are exhibiting the standard behaviors (groaning, moaning, etc.) we are
in pain. Notice that there is no reference in this definition to the *feeling* of pain. Pain is not defined as a feeling but rather as an internal state that plays a certain causal role - that is part of a causal nexus - in that it is caused by injury and in turn causes groaning, moaning, etc. The middle point of our causal chain, namely the conscious feeling of pain, is not included in the functionalist causal chain. Needless to say this definition causes all sorts of problems for the functionalist.

The first critical problem is that if I am in pain then I know this *even if* I don’t know that I am injured or damaged and *even if* I don’t see myself groaning or wincing in the mirror. I learn of pain directly through conscious feeling. This is how things work most of the time. I *first feel* pain say a sharp sting under my foot. I inspect the affected area only to discover that I have stepped on a black ant that has dug its incisors into the sole of my foot. So I learn of my injury *after* having the conscious feeling of pain. Nor do I learn of my injury through a third person broadcast, for example, when my friend tells me that I winced a moment ago. I have first person access to my own pain and don’t need a friend to tell me when I feel it. Nor do I learn of my injury because I caught sight of myself wincing in the mirror or because I heard myself say ‘YIKES!’ I first learn of my injury because I *feel* the pain. And yet, for the functionalist, this conscious feeling is not any part of the definition of pain. So his definition is simply incredible. In response to my criticism, he offers a worn out functionalist strategy saying that the internal state of pain, among all the other things that it *causes* (groaning, wincing, etc.), also directly *causes* a belief in me that I am in pain. This is how I come to know I am in pain even though 1) the definition refers to no conscious feeling, 2) I did not see the injury occurring and 3) there is no one to tell me and there is no mirror around. Pain is defined as a state that causes me to believe that I am in pain thus explaining my privileged first person knowledge of my own state of pain. So the functionalist is able to maintain a definition of pain that only refers to its (functional) role in a causal nexus. Pain is defined as the internal state that is caused by injury or damage and that in turn (directly) causes a belief in the subject that he is in pain and that also causes rubbing, avoiding, *groaning*, wincing, and such behaviors. If at this point you want to yell ‘what about the fact that pain is a conscious feeling!?’ then I can *feel* your pain.

A second critical problem for the functionalist is that because of the way he defines pain he must accept that *anyone* who is injured or damaged and exhibits the relevant behavior (groaning, wincing, etc.) is in pain. But imagine that you come into contact with a company of Andromedans (from our neighboring galaxy) who exhibit precisely these behaviors when they break some part of their anatomy. As a functionalist, you are forced to conclude that the Andromedans are in pain. But all the while, it is easy enough to entertain the possibility that the Andromedans actually do not feel any pain. In fact, we notice that whenever we chop off of one of their tentacles and they cry and weep and begin to avoid us, they also surprisingly become more compassionate towards us (though are meetings are now less frequent because of their avoidance behavior). In order to conclude that the Andromedans are in pain we will have to know what it is they *feel* when we amputate their appendages. While it is true that they exhibit the avoidance behaviors typical of pain states, it is possible that their avoidance of our amputation treatment may be due to other factors such as shyness or uncontrollable excitement. So it is obviously possible that they do not experience the kind of feeling we do when someone chops off some part of *our* anatomy. Thus, what is definitive of pain is the conscious feeling rather than merely this or that behavior. The functionalist may attempt to turn this criticism against us. If we cannot know whether an Andromedan experiences pain
then it is also true that we cannot know whether our human neighbor down the street experiences it. After all, he also cries and winces when he is injured but there is no way to tell whether he really feels pain. This is a bullet that we ought to bite. It is absolutely true that we cannot know for sure whether our fellow human beings feel pain. This is an epistemic limit and is part and parcel of the human condition. I say that the grass is green and my neighbor across the fence concurs. But I will never really know what he consciously experiences when he sees green. I am pricked by a thorn and I say that I am in pain and my neighbor says that he knows the feeling. But does he really? Maybe he always experiences a different feeling from mine whenever he is pricked by a thorn. So there are limitations to what I can know and I can never really be sure that the nature of your conscious experiences is the same as mine. But this has nothing to do with my definition of pain. For me, pain is first and foremost a conscious feeling. When I ask you, you say the same. When I ask the functionalist, he sheepishly admits that there is always a conscious feeling involved (though, as a physicalist, he understandably does not want that non-physical feeling in the definition).

We have arrived at a crucial result. Having considered all things, we conclude that there is traffic between the physical and non-physical realm. When I pinch you then you feel pain. The pinching is physical while the conscious feeling is non-physical. When you feel pain then you say ‘ouch!’ or wince or something. The feeling is non-physical while the exclamation or other behavioral consequence is physical. This journey from the physical to the non-physical and back to the physical is a deeply mysterious one. Even so, we must accept the reality of it. It means that physical causes can produce non-physical effects and vice versa. We have included this discussion on free will and consciousness in order to show that non-physical thought can produce physical action. If a non-physical feeling of pain can produce a physical sound such as ‘ouch!’, then a non-physical thought can produce physical action. However, for such an event to occur in the real world, the non-physical thought must generate physical energy in some form or other. The non-physical thought must produce some quanta of energy (such as, for example, the photon) in order to initiate a psychochemical process in the brain that will ultimately produce a physical action. In this way, thought produces energy.

Human biological life depends fully on physical matter-energy. If there were no matter-energy then we could neither live nor think. Even so, we have also made room for the Cartesian intuition that there is some aspect of the human mind that is nonphysical. In other words, the matter-energy that gives us physical life is actually the basis for something nonphysical as well, namely conscious experience, thought, and free will. We have seen that this nonphysical dimension of human beings is actually up to the task of producing physical action in the world. This nonphysical dimension of mentality does not change the fact that we depend fully on physical matter-energy. Our nonphysical thought may be able to produce something so limited as human action but it certainly cannot generate the matter-energy of which we are composed let alone the matter-energy of the whole universe. Before becoming conscious beings we were a blob of matter-energy and after we lose consciousness we will remain a blob of matter-energy. As blobs of matter-energy, we depend fully on physical matter-energy for our transient conscious lives while physical matter-energy does not depend on us for its existence. I have argued that this is not the case with God. As a side, when speaking of God I speak only of pure energy and not of matter. More to the point, the relation of God to the physical (specifically to physical energy) is critically different from that of human beings to the physical. God also depends on physical energy for his consciousness, thought, and freedom of will. In this, God is
similar to human beings. But the critical point is that physical energy in turn depends on God, specifically it depends on God’s thought because the original source of all energy is divine thought. It is the nonphysical thought of God that generates all the physical energy of the world. The whole point of this subsection was to show how this is possible, how nonphysical thought can and does generate physical energy. We learned that nonphysical human thought generates physical (quanta of) energy in order to initiate psychochemical processes in the brain that produce action in the world. Having established that nonphysical thought produces physical energy, we can turn to attend to ultimate considerations. We realize that we must find a sufficient reason for the existence of all the energy of the universe. I have proposed that that reason is divine thought.

Argument from Consciousness

We have seen how difficult it is for a physicalist to define pain because pain has a definitive nonphysical dimension. For the same reason, a physicalist must be at a loss to define the conscious experience of abstract meaning. Human beings have conscious experiences of understanding the meaning of things. I understand concepts such as, for example, ‘circle’ and ‘emotion’. When I think of circle I may think of the shape drawn by a compass, and I may think of the face of the sun and the moon. Such experiences of understanding give me a secure feeling that I know what a circle is. As in the case of pain, above and beyond the physical processes in the brain, there is a non-physical conscious experience (of understanding what a circle is). It is very difficult to see how such conscious understanding can be produced in a machine. John Searle’s famous Chinese Room allegory bears witness to this. 25 There is a person in a room who does not speak Chinese. Even so, the room operates in such a way as to give the impression that it understands Chinese. This is possible because the person in the room has an instruction manual that, for every question written in Chinese received in the room’s input window, tells him what answer written in Chinese he should place in the output window. The instructions are so good that the room always answers intelligently (and could carry on a lively conversation with any Chinese author) even though the person in the room does not understand Chinese. Searle’s point is that this is all that computers do. They may give the impression that they understand things but all they are doing is following a clever program (instruction manual) and nothing in the computer actually understands anything (analogous to the person in the room who does not understand Chinese). A computer can have no conscious experience of understanding. The allegory also shows that computers can have no conscious experiences whatsoever because nothing in the conceptual arsenal of Artificial Intelligence can put the ‘lights on’ inside a machine.

The experience of understanding is one of the impenetrable mysteries of the universe. There is no physical or biological theory that even begins to explain it. But physical and biological theories actually fail in a far more systematic way. They cannot explain any conscious experience at all let alone the experience of understanding. While evolutionary theory could explain the emergence of physical traits (such as the long neck of a giraffe) using its most powerful concepts, namely, random mutation and natural selection, there is no concept in its arsenal that could explain the emergence of consciousness. 26 This is another thing that is made evident by Searle’s allegory because it does not apply only to (the evolution of) machines but also to the evolution of organisms. Random mutation in physical matter-energy cannot
generate conscious experience in an organism because it is merely a bio-mechanical process that results in some organisms being better survivors in their environment. It is in no relevant sense different from trial and error engineering in Artificial Intelligence that aims to build more efficient machines. That the former process has an organic basis, while the latter inorganic, makes no relevant difference to the issue of consciousness. No matter what combination of matter-energy emerges (whether by natural or artificial engineering) there is a conceptual lacuna (shown by Searle’s allegory) when it comes to the question of how it will become conscious. No human concept has so much as hinted that this lacuna will ever be filled.

In fact, it is the very nature of science that it excludes from its domain such an elusive problem as that of consciousness. This is because scientific inquiry has defined itself by its exclusive interest in the exploration of the physical world. Scientists, in their professional capacity, are simply not interested in nonphysical phenomena. Nor can they be faulted for this given the breathtaking success that has resulted from their singularity of purpose. When scientists have worried about the conscious experience of secondary qualities (color, taste, touch, etc.) their progress has often been thwarted. For example, when temperature was thought to be a felt property (felt hotness and coldness) there was no way of demonstrating that physical processes (particle velocities and collisions) could explain the feeling of hot or cold. It is only when scientists relegated conscious feeling to the realm of private sensory phenomena that a grand unity of temperature exchange laws and thermodynamics (motion of molecules) became possible. Temperature is now explained in terms of the motion of molecules and this is seen to be a deeper scientific explanation of the phenomenon. But notice that there is no effort to explain temperature in terms of the conscious feeling it generates in experimental observers. The fact that a hot plate will burn your finger is a scientific fact and is explained by the motion of molecules in the plate and their effect on the molecules in your finger. However, what heat and burning consciously feel like is excluded from the realm of scientific inquiry and the definition of temperature has accordingly been narrowed to a purely physical and thus tractable one (analogous to the physicalist definition of pain). In its path to success, science has deliberately and wisely excluded an inquiry into conscious feeling and experience. Physical laws are far more unified and coherent when the elusive problem of consciousness is kept outside the domain of science and not allowed to reveal the gaping chasms in scientific explanations of reality. Science has purposely chosen to be a limited inquiry – an inquiry only into the nature of the physical world.

Of course, this is precisely the reason that there can be no scientific explanation of consciousness, as all scientific explanation is physical. Given that fact, the only other kind of explanation that is possible is a nonphysical personal explanation. I propose that God is the nonphysical person responsible for consciousness. So we basically have yet another theistic argument that complements the ones we saw in Chapter 1. We can call this the argument from consciousness. The nonphysical nature of consciousness and the physical/nonphysical interfaces that it demands can only be explained by the existence of a nonphysical person who also understands the interface of the physical and nonphysical realms. God’s person is nonphysical but it has a physical basis in pure energy. Thus, God fits the bill because His nonphysical personhood resident in a physical basis gives Him an understanding of the interface of the two realms.
Having expressed my views on the relation of God and energy, I will now turn to a discussion of the relation of God and space and God and time. Descartes’ evil demon or its modern reincarnation as the evil neurosurgeon can once again improve our understanding, this time not of dualism but of space. Imagine that an evil neurosurgeon kidnap you in your sleep, removes your brain from your skull but this time with the eyeballs attached and places it in a nice solution in a small fish tank inside a dark room. Your brain has all the life support it needs in order for you to have conscious experiences but the only sense that you have retained is that of sight (ears, nose, tongue and the rest of the body are all stored away as memorabilia in some preserving solution). Although you have your eyes they are not of any use to you because there is no light in the room. This is not at all a situation where dilating pupils would allow the eyes to take in more light and thus begin to discern objects in the dark. The room has no light whatsoever, that is, absolutely no light, it is in absolute darkness. As you wake up from your drug induced state, you realize along with all the other things that you cannot do that you also cannot see anything. Or more accurately, you see only blackness. You want some sort of spatial orientation but, to say the least, this is difficult because you cannot stretch your arm out or shout into the void. Given the hopelessness of the situation you begin to do what any reasonable person would do in such a situation, that is, you begin to do philosophy!

Although you are already resigned to the fact that there is no way to acquire any spatial orientation, you actually realize something much deeper. You realize that beyond spatial orientation, you cannot even establish the very existence of space. In the past, whenever you were enveloped in darkness, you could at least always feel your body extended in physical space. Moreover, never before were you enveloped in such absolute darkness. There was always some light, however dim, reflecting off this or that surface, finding its way to your retina and giving you the experience of spatial depth. But now, sunk in darkness, deprived of all motion and light, there is no way for you to experience spatial depth. Of course, the evil neurosurgeon knows all this and is taking full advantage of it. Unbeknownest to you he is planting skeptical thoughts about the existence of space into your brain from his wireless laptop outside the room. His goal is to sever your connection to the past and the (decidedly) unusual strategy that he has chosen is to get you to abandon your belief in space. If you deny the existence of space, you will deny the reality of your spatial past and thus lose any last remnants of psychological security that this past is giving you. Unusual though it is his strategy seems to work. In subtle ways, he keeps suggesting to you that you are immaterial, non-physical, non-spatial mind and that, like the mythical unicorn, space is merely a concept not a reality. With the passage of time and deep philosophical suggestion, you become less and less certain of the existence of space. Given that you have no evidence to marshal against this skeptical invasion, you gradually become susceptible to the extreme view that there is no such thing as space.

But space is a fundamental concept and it is not easy to be rid of it. There are still memories of space that you continue to hold on to. In the past, on many occasions you have reached into space to pet your dog or grab a bottle of water from the fridge. You often turned on a light in your room and feasted on the spatial depth offered by objects at various locations in it — the bed, the desk, the mirror! But, alas, your situation now is as different as it could be. You don’t have your limbs and your retinas are starved for light. How can you prove to yourself the
existence of space and thereby establish that the embodied past is not a figment of your imagination? The simple answer is that you cannot. Without locomotion, sound, or light (all are forms of energy) there is no way to prove that there is space.

On one of your philosophical wanderings you bring to mind a famous debate between Leibniz and Newton on whether space is a relational concept or an absolute entity. Leibniz thought that space is not absolute, that it is not an independent entity but rather a set of relations between objects and events. For example, in the good old days when you used to walk from your living room to the kitchen, the television would be three feet to your right and the sofa five feet to your left. The easy chair was next to the kitchen door while the rug was in the center of the room. Your wife would often call you from the workspace by the north wall of the kitchen. Thus, Leibniz was of the view that our concept of space depends on the location of objects and events in relation to each other. Space is a relational concept. It now seems to you that Leibniz was obviously right. You think of him fondly and say ‘good man’. In your state of absolute light deprivation you realize how vital it is for light to reflect of objects such as the sofa and the television in order to give you spatial depth and orientation. In your state of sound deprivation you realize how vital it is for you to hear someone calling from some direction or other. And when there is neither light nor sound, when in the deep night there was a power outage, you realize how vital it was to be able to walk through the living room cautiously setting aside the toys randomly strewn across the floor by the kids and feeling your way to the kitchen to get the flashlight.

Pondering Leibniz’s view gives you the deep realization that there can be no knowledge of space without energy. To experience spatial depth, a beam of photons from a light source or reflecting surface must strike your retinas or sound waves must fall on your eardrums. Alternatively, you could be blindfolded and have ear plugs but still experience space by simply walking through it or stretching your arm out into it or simple feeling the spatial extension of your body. All of these avenues for experiencing space are forms of energy. Light, sound, motion, and touch are all forms of energy (in cases where mass is involved we will keep the discussion simple by thinking of mass and energy as equivalent). But with all of these avenues closed, as in your present state, you have the deep realization that you cannot arrive at knowledge of space. In other words, without energy there can be no knowledge of space. From an epistemological viewpoint, there is no space without energy.

With that deep realization on your part, the evil neurosurgeon pops open a bottle of champagne. What is the point of positing the existence of space when (in your present condition) you can never know that it exists? While the evil neurosurgeon celebrates his big victory, clueless of him and his celebrations you simply continue to plod through the philosophical sludge. You realize that you still have not given thought to Newton’s side of the story. Newton believed that space was absolute, an entity that had a reality independent of objects and events. Space does not depend on the relation of kitchen door to easy chair (the easy chair was next to the kitchen door). Rather, the kitchen door and the easy chair occupy an independently existing entity called space. Had there been no kitchen door or easy chair, there would still be space. Had you never walked through the living room experiencing a bombardment of photons from sofa and television upon your retinas, there would still be space. For Newton, space has an unassailable ontological status. In defense of his view, Newton did offer a bucket of water (we consider this famous thought experiment later in this
section), and for a couple of centuries this bucket remarkably did put a lid on Leibniz’s relational view of space. But in your present jam, no bucket (not even one belonging to Sir Isaac Newton) can come to your aid because if you believe that there are such things as buckets then you have to believe that they occupy space, that is, you have to believe that there is space even before you start thinking about whether the bucket experiment can establish that very result and so this would be blatantly question-begging. Nothing short of a firefly that was inadvertently left in the room by the evil neurosurgeon can get you out of your present jam.

It is all well and good to seek solace in the possible ontological independence of space, but without Newton’s bucket you realize that you don’t have a response to the basic criticism stated at the outset of the last paragraph: what’s the point of positing the ontological independence of space when you can never know whether or not it really exists? In fact, you may be in even deeper trouble then you have realized. You have already accepted the epistemological dependence of space on energy. For example, without light from a source or the motion of your body you cannot know physical distance. But it now occurs to you that it is further possible that space also ontologically depends on energy. It may be that beyond knowledge of space, even the very existence of space may depend on energy. You realize that it is a distinct ontological possibility that there can be no space without energy (by the way, this is no idle fancy, for as we will see this could be the essence of what special relativity and quantum mechanics together maintain).

God-Energy-Space
Whatever personal aims the evil neurosurgeon may have fulfilled, he has helped us to take the next step in sketching a portrait of the divine. I propose the following conditional:

5. If energy then space

This is obviously true. If there is energy then there has to be the space that it is transmitted in. So a necessary condition for the existence of energy is the existence of space. In fact, we can simply (but loosely) define energy in terms of space. Let’s say that energy is some disturbance travelling through space. For example, light energy is an electromagnetic disturbance (photon) travelling through space. The mobile phone on my desk has potential energy in that it can fall to the ground. But it has that potential energy by virtue of a gravitational field that may be seen to be the result of gravitational disturbances (gravitons) travelling through space. Thus, 5 has solid basis. I now propose another conditional though this one is far more controversial:

6. If space then energy

This is not at all obvious. How can energy be a necessary condition for the existence of space when it is so easy to imagine empty space with no energy whatsoever? In other words, we can easily imagine an absolute vacuum, absolutely empty space. However, our imagining things do not make them so (remember Descartes’ error), and the physics of an absolute vacuum says otherwise. An absolute vacuum is a notion of classical not quantum physics. In classical physics, a region of space is completely empty if it has no particles and the value of every field in it is uniformly zero. However, when we consider quantum uncertainty this notion of
complete emptiness simply dissolves away. Brian Greene begins to make the point in a lucid way:

   Once we know that a field, like any of the known force fields, is an ingredient in the makeup of the cosmos, then we know that it exists everywhere – it is stitched into the fabric of the cosmos. It is impossible to excise the field, much as it is impossible to excise space itself. The nearest we can come to eliminating a field’s presence, therefore, is to have it take on a value that minimizes its energy. For force fields, like the electromagnetic force, that value is zero…

Thus, an electromagnetic field, for example, exists everywhere and so there is no such thing as absolutely empty space. Against this, our classical intuitions tell us that even if we accept that there is always an electromagnetic field present, we can still exercise the option of setting the value of that field to zero in some region of space so that there is zero energy in that region and it can be thought of as empty space for all practical purposes. However, quantum uncertainty does not allow us to do this. According to this principle, if you know the value of a field at some point in space then you cannot also know the rate of change of its value at that point. So if the value is indeed zero at that point then you cannot know that the rate of change of that value is also zero. In other words, because of this quantum jitteriness there is no way to keep the value of the electromagnetic field at zero at any point in space. For modern physics, there is no empty space. Rather, there are always vacuum fluctuations of energetic fields.

The evil neurosurgeon has already demonstrated the epistemological truth of 6. If you know of space then it is only through energy (light, motion, etc.). We now learn that modern physics has conclusively established that we can never find a pristine stretch of space without energy or even a point of space without the vacuum fluctuations of energetic fields. Now it is true that I have not demonstrated the ontological dependence of space on energy, if such a demonstration were at all possible. But even so, given all that we have shown, I feel that it is reasonable to define space in terms of energy. Let’s say that space is nothing more than the medium through which energy travels, that is, the presence of space necessarily entails the presence of energy (this is what 6 is saying). This definition is reasonable because space does not have any functional significance beyond being a medium for electromagnetic, gravitational, strong, and weak energy. So we can feel confident in combining 5 and 6 into the following bi-conditional and proposing it as a basic feature of reality:

   7.  Space if and only if energy.

I should now tell you why I am so interested in this interdependence of space and energy. Remember 4, the bi-conditional that stated: energy if and only if divine thought. As God and divine thought logically depend on each other (see Figure 1), I will restate 4 as:

   8.  Energy if and only if God.

The fundamental connection I am aiming at must now be obvious. In 7, I have introduced the interdependent concept of energy-space. In 8, I have the interdependent concept of God-energy. As both space and God are interdependent with energy we have our very own theological grand unification theory, the concept God-energy-space. You can think of this as the interdependence of God-energy and space or, alternatively, as the interdependence of
God and energy-space. But if all that you are wondering is why I should want to pull off a stunt like this then I have a good answer for you. If I were to simply have accepted 5 (energy depends on space) which is obviously true and left things at that without pushing for 6 (space depends on energy) then I would be faced with the following dilemma. God would depend on energy that would in turn depend on space. In other words, God would depend on space and this is hardly fitting for the perfect being. A pre-requisite for the existence of God would be the existence of space while there would be no pre-requisite for the existence of space. Thus, space would have the ultimate reality. By asserting 6, I get space depends on energy that in turn depends on God (from 3 and 8). In other words, while God depends on space, space depends on God. While space would be a pre-requisite for the existence of God, God would be a pre-requisite for the existence of space. God-energy-space would have the ultimate reality. And, of course, on the view that I am advancing, God-energy-space is the new name for the old God.

*God-Energy-Space-Time*

The only fundamental concept missing from our grand unification medley is time. But with energy loosely defined as a disturbance *travelling* through space and space loosely defined as (nothing more than) the medium through which energy *travels*, time is already implicit in these definitions. For anything to *travel* it must have a speed and this by definition is distance covered in unit time. So time is already implicit in the God-energy-space medley. Our work is only to make it explicit. We can begin with the following conditional:

9. If energy then time.

This says that time is a necessary condition for the existence of energy and it is obviously true. There has to be time for there to be any sort of disturbance because a disturbance necessarily occurs over a period of time however short. Moreover, if a disturbance (or anything at all for that matter) is to travel through space then it takes time to do so however short a period that may be. Thus, 9 has logical basis. The following conditional is only a *little* harder to defend:

10. If time then energy.

This says that for there to be time there must be energy. Imagine a universe without energy – an empty universe of pure space. The permanent state of this universe would be empty and unchanging. Without the restless fluctuations of fields and particles, that is, with nothing at all happening in this universe, could there be a concept of time? In the real universe, whatever else time may be, it is obviously a measure of existential change. The difference between yesterday and today is that things are different today. The Earth is at a different point in its solar orbit and the sun is at a different point in its galactic orbit. But in an empty universe there is no change, so what would time be good for, what would it measure? With nothing going on what could possibly establish the passage of time. I am basically articulating a relational view of time that says that time is a relation between things and events. If there are neither things nor events then there are obviously no temporal relations between them and so there is no passage or concept of time. This is parallel to Leibniz’s relational view of space articulated earlier. Against this, one could postulate (as Newton did) that time is absolute and that it would tick away even in an empty universe. However, we have no way of establishing the truth
of this. There is no way to know whether there can be a period of empty time.33 This is strong epistemological support in favor of the relational view of time and it is parallel to the epistemological support in favor of the relational view of space. Remember, the evil neurosurgeon demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that we cannot know of the existence of absolute space – a space independent of energy. In the same way, we cannot know of the existence of absolute time – a time independent of energy. Thus, with 10, I feel we are in fairly safe hands. We then follow this with our standard move to a bi-conditional:

11. Time if and only if energy.

With that time joins the elite club called God-energy-space-time or God for short. The crucial interdependencies work as follow: 1) God-energy is interdependent with space and 2) God-energy is interdependent with time. It is irresistible to hope that Einstein’s view of absolute space-time will allow us to establish yet another fundamental interdependence – that of space and time. This would considerably reinforce the result that we have arrived at. But I will now show that the interdependence of space and time may not be quite as fundamental as Einstein thought. Rather, space and time are connected through energy as shown above. We have the concepts of energy-space (7) and energy-time (11) and it is these concepts that indirectly establish the interdependence of space and time.

Absolute Space-Time

The journey to Einstein’s absolute space-time could naturally begin with a look at Newton’s bucket. The bucket was Newton’s response to Leibniz’s relational view of space – the view that space is merely a set of relations between objects and events. In Leibniz’s view, space is analogous to an alphabet in which the letters are related to each other (d is three letters before h and t is one letter after r and so on) but if there are no letters then there is no alphabet.34 By analogy, for Leibniz, space is the relations of objects and events but if there are no objects and events then there is no space. Newton set out to show that this is not the case and that space is an absolute entity that has a reality independent of objects and events. He offered the bucket as a demonstration of this. Moreover, it was a deeply effective demonstration because, while Leibniz did not capitulate to the view that space is absolute, he was still forced to admit, “I grant there is a difference between absolute true motion of a body and a mere relative change of its situation with respect to another body”35 (Emphasis added).

For a couple of centuries after this debate, Newton’s laws of motion founded on his concept of absolute space became the scientific paradigm.

How did the bucket usher in absolute space as the paradigm? Well, it had water in it, and it was made to hang by a rope that is twisted tightly so that it is ready to unwind.36 Initially (before unwinding) the bucket is motionless and the standing water has a flat surface. We can say that the water and the bucket are in a state of rest relative to each other. When let go, the twisted rope begins to unwind and the bucket begins to spin. However, we notice that the water does not immediately begin to spin and continues to have a flat surface. We can say that the bucket is spinning relative to the water. Soon, as the bucket picks up speed the water also begins to spin (because of friction) and the surface of the spinning water is concave (as water molecules are pushed outwards to the sides of the bucket). We have a problem.37 The concave
surface of the water is proof that it is spinning but what is it spinning relative to? We cannot say that it is spinning relative to the bucket because the bucket is also spinning. Newton’s answer: the water is spinning relative to absolute space. In fact, as the rope begins to twist the other way, the bucket slows down to a rest but the water keeps spinning. When the bucket is at rest the water still has a concave surface because it is still spinning. But what is it spinning relative to? Even though the bucket is now at rest, we cannot say bucket. This is because earlier on when the water had the same concave shape (and was thus spinning) it was not spinning relative to the bucket (because the bucket was also spinning). So earlier on the water was spinning relative to something else and it must be spinning relative to that something else even now when the bucket is at rest. What is that something else? What is there in the background that the water is spinning relative to both when the bucket was spinning and now that the bucket is at rest? Newton: absolute space.

You may feel that Newton is jumping the gun. He seems to be calling in the fire brigade to put out a candle. Surely, there are more familiar and accessible answers than absolute space. After all, the water could simply be spinning relative to the laboratory, or the Earth. We can say that when both water and bucket are spinning they are spinning relative to Earth, and when the water continues to spin after the bucket comes to rest then it is still spinning relative to Earth. It is good old Earth that is in the background and not mysterious absolute space. Anticipating the objection, Newton launched a couple of imaginary rocks tied to a rope into intergalactic space.\textsuperscript{38} Given the purpose of the launch, it is no surprise that the rocks were twirling like a whirling slingshot and so the rope was pulled taut. The state of the rope as taut is analogous to the state of the water surface as concave. Both states give away the spinning motion. But with the rope spinning in intergalactic space there is one crucial difference. There is no Earth in the background relative to which the rope is spinning. You may then surmise that it is spinning relative to the galaxies and that explains why it is taut. But, of course, with the intergalactic launch, Newton’s real point is that the rope will spin even if there are no galaxies. Even if there were nothing else in the universe, the rope will still be taut because it is spinning. The question is: what is it spinning relative to? Newton: absolute space.

Newton first described the bucket experiment in 1689, and there was no serious challenge to his reasoning until the mid-1800s when the Austrian physicist Ernest Mach offered an escape from absolute space. Newton’s basic point was that even in intergalactic space, or for that matter, even in an otherwise empty universe, a rope tied to a couple of rocks will be taut if it spins (relative to absolute space). This point has solid basis in the everyday intuition that when we spin we feel our arms flung outwards, as when the arms of a spinning ice skater splay outwards.\textsuperscript{39} In the same way, the water molecules in a spinning bucket are thrown outward (to the sides) giving the water surface a concave shape. But Mach questioned whether this everyday intuition could be applied in an empty universe. He reasoned that the situation in an empty universe would be so fundamentally different that everyday intuitions cannot be used to draw familiar conclusions. His radical challenge to Newton’s basic point is that if the universe were empty a spinning rope would not be taut. In point of fact, his challenge is far more subtle than that. The subtlety is that if the universe were empty there would simply be no way to tell that the rope is spinning in the first place.\textsuperscript{40} Our evil neurosurgeon can assist with this one. Say that a robotic hand clasps your brain (or brain-eyes, I should say) and momentarily lifts it out of the nice solution in the fish tank. It then starts to spin you at a good speed.\textsuperscript{41} As the room is absolutely dark there is no way for you to tell that you are being spun
around. In the same way, if you were spinning in an empty universe (in this case you are in possession of your body) there would be no way to tell because there would be nothing (for example, no stars drawing arcs of light as you spin) to act as a benchmark. But Mach took that point to a radically new level. He asserted that in an empty universe you would not even be able to feel the spinning motion. It would be like the robotic hand spinning your brain-eyes in a dark room because in that case you don’t have a body and cannot feel a thing. Thus, Mach proposed that if the universe were empty, there is no way even to establish whether you or a rope or anything else is spinning. In an empty universe, there is no difference between spinning and not spinning because there are no benchmarks whatsoever for comparison.

A standard objection to Mach’s view is to consider a universe with only one star. If you were spinning in such a universe, you would have a single benchmark for comparison. When you are stationary you see the star as a pinpoint of light. But as you spin, the star draws an arc of light each time it enters your field of vision. So there is a difference between spinning and not spinning. Given this difference, does this now mean that you will feel the spinning motion? How can the presence of a single star cause your arms to splay outwards and your body to feel the spinning motion? After all, the star could be replaced by an 11 watt energy saver (at a much closer distance). So the question for Mach is: how can an 11 watt energy saver cause you to feel the spinning motion (simply because it is a benchmark for comparison)? Mach had a prescient answer to this objection. He said that the feeling of spinning will increase in proportion to the matter in the universe. So if there is only one star then you will feel the spinning considerably more than with just an 11 watt energy saver, and if there are two stars then the feeling will be even greater, while if the universe has all the matter that ours does then you will have the familiar feeling that you do when you go to the amusement park and sit in a merry-go-round with your kids. The answer was prescient because in the theory of general relativity that Einstein articulated over half a century later, the quantity of matter in the universe does influence gravity by its effect on the warping and curving of space-time.

While Einstein was deeply inspired by Mach’s ideas, his special theory of relativity basically weighed in on Newton’s side. Einstein came to agree with Newton that in the background of all things there is something absolute, relative to which the water, for example, is spinning. The point of difference between them had to do with the nature of that absolute background. Newton thought it is space while Einstein believed that it is space-time. Einstein demonstrated that Newton’s view of space and time as independent and absolute entities is incorrect. Space and time are not independent and absolute but are actually a single absolute entity – space-time. According to special relativity, the water surface is concave because it is spinning relative to absolute space-time. We can summarize these views as follows: Newton’s view is that in an empty universe a rope spins relative to absolute space and Mach’s is that it does not spin at all, and Einstein’s is that it spins relative to absolute space-time.

Motivated by the absoluteness of space-time and the invariance of the speed of light, Einstein and other physicists of his time did not opt for the name ‘relativity theory’ but rather the more accurate ‘invariance theory’ because at its core the theory points to the non-relativity of light speed and absoluteness of space-time. But then what justifies the name ‘relativity theory’? Well, motion through space is relative to motion through time. If you move slower through space (a person sitting on a park bench) you move faster through time while if you move faster through space (a person in a high speed spaceship) then you move slower through time. What
is not relative is the *combined* motion through space-time. For anything, its combined motion through space-time has invariant speed and this invariant speed is \( c \) – the speed of light. In other words, everything travels at light speed through space-time. A thing may travel faster through space and slower through time or vice versa but the combined space-time speed will always be \( c \). By analogy, we could imagine that all bullets travel at 680 mph regardless of direction. If a bullet travels North-West then its speed is distributed between the North and West directions. Northward and westward components of speed are both less than 680 mph, but total speed is invariant at 680 mph. In an analogous way, the speed of an object through space-time is always invariant at \( c \) regardless of how this speed is distributed between the space and time dimensions. Now imagine a bullet that travels purely westward. Its speed due West will be the invariant 680 mph because there is no component of speed in any other direction. Analogously, a photon travels at light speed through space thus exhausting all of its speed in the space dimension. There is no component of speed remaining for the time dimension and so speed through time is zero, that is, a photon does not age or decay (see Appendix 1).

Thus, from special relativity we get the following:

12. If space then time.
13. If time then space.
14. Space if and only if time.

And this of course reinforces our earlier results. We can now think of the interdependence of God-energy and space-time, rather than separately consider 1) God-energy and space and 2) God-energy and time. Thus, our theological grand unification is strengthened and we can feel self-assured in propounding the complete notion of God-energy-space-time or God for short. But all of this is too good to be true. Unfortunately, I find it difficult to put faith in 12, 13, and 14. To see why, we will need to look at the concept of entropy.

**Space-Time vs. Space-Entropy Rate**

For my purposes, it will be sufficient to think of entropy as disorder. Thus, a state of low entropy is a state of low disorder. The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy (disorder) of complex systems has a colossal tendency to increase. Eggs fall off the kitchen counter and splatter but you never see an egg un-splattering and jumping back onto the counter. Your house tends to get messier and run down but not tidier and well-maintained (unless there is considerable energy input from outside the system, that is, unless you put in the effort!). Oil spills damage coastal areas but spilled oil never re-enters its container spontaneously. The simple explanation of these phenomena is that states of disorder are immensely more in number than states of order. In comparison to an immense multitude of disordered states, there is usually only one (or a handful of) ordered state(s) and so the probability of increasing disorder is, for all practical purposes, 1. An egg can splatter in billions and billions of different ways but there is only one way (or relatively few ways) for it to be whole. The universe, of course, is a complex system and thus relentlessly moves in the direction of increasing entropy. In physics, this has given rise to the idea that the direction of time may be determined by the direction of entropy. Time may simply be a measure of
increasing entropy. The difference between this moment and the next is that there has been a change in the universe towards a state of higher disorder. Ever since the big bang, the entropy of the universe has always increased at a significant rate and the theory of time that is on offer here is that time is the measure of this relentless drive towards increasing disorder. The reason I do not want to put faith in 14 is because I don’t agree with this theory of time and I will explain my disagreement in the next subsection (A History of Time).

For now, according to relativity, time is relative to motion through space. If you are accelerating in outer space the flow of your time will slow down relative to someone who is not accelerating. However, it seems to me that it is not time that is slowing down but rather the rate of entropy increase of your body. It seems that the force that is causing you to accelerate is also slowing down the rate of your entropy increase. It is as if the accelerating force is putting your body into some kind of cold storage so that it ages (decays) at a slower rate. This may not be as surprising as it may sound. If you put a banana in the fridge it will last longer because you have slowed down its chemical reactions with the environment. But it takes a considerable input of energy to get the fridge to cool the air around the banana. This energy input seems worthwhile because it slows the rate of entropy increase in the banana thereby preserving it longer. In the same sense, the energy input from the accelerating force is somehow slowing down the rate of entropy increase in your body. You may object that even your clock is ticking slower relative to someone who is not accelerating. But I can explain that. The reason is that your clock is part of the same physical system as your body. When the rate of entropy increase slows down it does so for both you and your clock. But here is the critical point. Your body and your clock give away the rate of entropy increase (and this has slowed down for both), they do not record the flow of time. As I don’t subscribe to the theory that time is a measure of entropy increase, I see your body and your clock basically subjected to a change in the rate of entropy increase but not to a change in the flow of time. Again, for an accelerating system, it is not time that slows down but rather the rate of entropy increase. Relativity also tells us that time moves slower in a gravitational field just as it does in an accelerating framework (this is Einstein’s principle of equivalence: a gravitational field has the same effect as an accelerating force). My clock here on the Earth’s surface ticks away slower than a clock higher in the atmosphere because the Earth’s gravitational field is stronger where I am. My explanation of this phenomenon is also the same as before. For whatever reason, the Earth’s gravitational field slows down the rate of entropy increase in my body and it is this slower rate that my clock is ticking away at. My clock is not recording a slower time but is rather giving living testimony to the slower rate of entropy increase. The critical point is that time is not that same thing as rate of entropy increase. It is an ontologically deeper notion. Finally, I can tell you why I will not accept 12, 13, or 14 (when they are arrived at directly through special relativity). The reason is that relativity only claims to give us a relation of space and time. Its claim is that motion in space and/or location in space determine the flow of time. However, I believe that all relativity gives us is a relation of space to rate of entropy increase. Motion in space and/or location in space determine not the flow of time but rather merely the rate of entropy increase.

By the by, having established the interdependence of energy and space (7) and energy and time (11), you may have noticed that we cannot actually empty out Einstein’s universe for Newton’s thought experiment (rope-and-rocks). We can get rid of all the matter in the universe so that the warping and curving of space-time will be drastically less and space could
be seen as a neat 3D grid of horizontal and vertical lines. But we cannot get rid of the all the energy in the universe because 7 tells us that without energy there would be no space, and 11 tells us that without energy there would be no time. In Einstein’s language, without energy there would be no space-time. The point is that we can never empty out all the energy of the universe (and that’s just a thought experiment. From a practical point of view we can never empty out any of it). Thus, our rope tied to a couple of twirling rocks has to spin in a universe that is not empty but rather has energy in proportion to the volume of space in it (ala 7). There is no such thing as a completely empty universe and so there was no point in Newton and Mach trying to imagine one. In spirit, this vindicates Newton’s absolutist views regarding the background relative to which the water is spinning. There is absolute energy-space-time and the water has a concave shape because it is spinning relative to this ever present background. A rope tied to a couple of twirling rocks will not remain slack ala Mach but will pull taut ala Newton-Einstein because absolute energy-space-time is the benchmark relative to which it is spinning. You may further conjecture that it pulls taut because of all the energy (that must necessarily be present) in this universe that has been emptied of all matter. With the Higgs field introduced below, that conjecture is not far off the mark. And, of course, all of this gives us a purely physical viewpoint. From a metaphysical viewpoint, there is absolute God-energy-space-time and the water always spins relative to that.

A History of Time
It is time for a short history of the cosmos courtesy of modern physics. Our guide will be the new inflationary cosmology that has won widespread acceptance since the 1980s. As one would expect, and as philosophers are always happy to remind us, cosmology does not address the question of fundamental origin. However, inflationary cosmology is spectacularly successful at explaining early developments in the ancient universe.

Our story begins even before the big bang more than 14 billion years ago. All that exists is a primordial chaotic soup of space and energy. Then in a random quantum fluctuation, an ultramicroscopic nugget of space (inside the soup) jumps into a state of high order. That is the sort of thing that will happen if you wait long enough. What is this state of high order (low entropy)? Well, it is what physicists call a Higgs field17 at zero value. A Higgs field is an energy field that is different from other fields in that it has high potential energy at zero value. Other fields, for example, electromagnetic fields have zero energy when their value is zero. But the peculiar thing about a Higgs field is that it has high potential energy when its value is zero and its energy function looks like a hilltop at zero that rolls into a valley as its value moves away from zero (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Energy

Value

Higgs Field: energy function

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So what happened in our ultramicroscopic nugget of space is that it had a Higgs field. At value 0, this field was poised on the hilltop of its energy function because of a rare quantum fluctuation and was thus momentarily in a state of low entropy. Basically, it had more potential energy than it knew what to do with. A vase on a window sill also has low entropy and high potential energy in that it can fall to the ground and get smashed into pieces going to high entropy and relinquishing its energy. Something similar happened to our Higgs field, except that as it gave up its energy it created our universe.

According to conventional inflationary models, the original space nugget was about $10^{-26}$ centimeters across and weighed in at about 20 pounds (less than your carry-on luggage) while according to some chaotic inflationary models (favored by many physicists) it was about $10^{-33}$ centimeters across and weighed about $10^{-5}$ grams (less than a grain of dust). So our universe has modest beginnings. But things did not stay that way for long. Within $10^{35}$ seconds of being poised on the hilltop, the Higgs field caused a literally fantastic expansion of the space nugget, by a factor of $10^{50}$ according to conservative estimates. This is commonly known as the big bang. Let’s look at the reason for this expansion.

In his general theory of relativity, Einstein set down his views on gravity and showed that it is not only mass that gravitates, but also energy and pressure. For example, a 1 kg iron weight measure will actually register a (very slightly) higher weight than 1 kg if its temperature is hot. This is because when the weight measure is hotter it has more energy, and energy gravitates and contributes to weight. Similarly, a wound up spring has a (very slightly) higher weight than a loose spring because pressure gravitates and thus contributes to weight. So because of general relativity we know that energy and pressure contribute to gravity. But Newton did not know this. He believed that only mass gravitates. He also believed that gravity is only an attractive force and did not know that it could also be repulsive.

The pressure of a compressed spring is positive and contributes to gravitational attraction. Imagine a compressed spring pushing against the lid of a box (as in a closed jack-in-the-box). The box will weigh more than it would if the lid had been left open and the spring had been left loose (remember that you had to exert energy to compress the spring and any additional energy contributes to weight). Now imagine the opposite. Imagine a stretched spring that is pulling on the sides of a box. The pressure of the extended spring is negative and the box will weigh less than it would if the spring were allowed to relax. Thus, pressure can also be negative. Negative pressure actually detracts from gravitational attraction and can produce gravitational repulsion. The vital fact about the Higgs field is that when it is poised on the hilltop it not only suffuses space with energy (it has high potential energy on the hilltop) but also contributes a uniform negative pressure. Because of negative pressure, the Higgs field in our space nugget produced repulsive gravity that caused the incredible expansion of the nugget mentioned earlier. This was the big bang. In contrast to this neat explanation for the big bang in inflationary cosmology, standard big bang cosmology is at a loss to explain why there was a big bang at all. In the standard model, gravity is understood only as an attractive force, and because the universe originated in an infinitesimal speck of incredible mass-energy density, gravitational attraction was incredibly strong. Given such incredible attraction inside the originating speck, what could possibly explain its explosion in a big bang?
cosmology solves the riddle with its concepts of low originating mass (20 or so pounds in conventional inflationary models) and repulsive gravity.

The inflationary model is an immeasurable improvement over standard big bang cosmology. The standard model reigned for half a century or so. This in itself is an incredible fact seeing how the standard model flies in the face of common sense. As I said, in that model space was an infinitesimal point of unbelievably colossal mass and density before the big bang. How in heavens (literally) can a mass that is far in excess of the present mass of the universe exist in an infinitesimal point (according to the standard model when the universe was younger it had greater mass than it does now)? How can anyone accept such a bizarre theory? We must be wary of physicists, or scientists in general, who are willing to ignore self-evident common sense for the sake of mathematical and physical precision and completeness. Standard big bangers started out by wanting to reverse the current expansion of the universe in order to retrace its origins. As they journeyed back in time they obviously saw that the universe got smaller and smaller. Taking this to its logical conclusion they realized that if we go far enough into the past the universe was vanishingly small but contained an unbelievably colossal amount of matter. If the standard big bangers had used a modicum of common sense, and had they not been blinded by physical and mathematical theories, they would have realized that there is something amiss. An infinitesimal point cannot have a mass in excess of our present universe. Nor can our present universe be made to fit inside an infinitesimal point. The problem seems to be psychological and cultural. There is something psychologically and culturally the matter with you if you believe that an infinitesimal point (incredibly smaller than the full stop at the end of this sentence) can have such a fantastic density so as to weigh more than our sun let alone our whole universe. But this is precisely what the standard big bangers believed for half a century or so. Should we trust the judgment of these people? Because there was nowhere for the universe to go but get smaller and smaller the standard big bangers could propose no alternative. But surely they could have come to the realization that their theory is wrong, or that there is something beyond the universe so that the universe could settle down at a reasonable volume in whatever this “beyond” is and not have to shrink to a vanishing point. When one ponders on the widespread acceptance of standard big bang cosmology it can only send a shiver down the spine. And this is not merely a historical comment. Even today, the main criticism of the standard model is not that it proposed a vanishing point that weighed far in excess of trillions of tons raised to the power 3. Rather, other criticisms are seen to be as or more weighty such as the standard model’s insistence that there was more mass in the early universe. But consider another example. There is growing consensus around the explanatory power of superstring theory. Keep in mind that string theory explains what it explains on the basis of the assumption that there are 10 or 11 real dimensions (rather than simply 3 space and one time dimension). It is a theory that defies all logic and experience. I am sure that Kant would have offered a nice a priori argument against the theory and I think that the whole business is a reminder that we need to keep our philosophical discernment about us.

One advantage of the standard model is that, given the unbelievably colossal mass of the infinitesimal point of origin, it had no problem explaining the vast amount of matter and energy we find in the universe today. You may wonder whether inflationary cosmology can parallel such power of explanation. It turns out that it can. According to inflationary theory, the negative pressure of the Higgs field produced repulsive gravity (with a vengeance) resulting in
a fantastic expansion of space. You may think that the Higgs field rolled down the hill and lost all its energy to the expansion. However, mathematical analysis shows that the energy density of the Higgs field did not change and so because of the phenomenal increase in the volume of space (increase in volume = (expansion factor)$^3 = (10^{40})^3 = 10^{120}$) the total energy of the Higgs field also rocketed by a factor of $10^{90}$ (keep in mind that the $10^{30}$ expansion factor is on the conservative end).58

This gargantuan increase in space and energy easily explains the matter and energy of our present universe. But why did the energy density of the Higgs field remain constant despite the explosive energy it was supplying to the expansion of the universe. Well, the expansion was doing work against our good old attractive gravity. Attractive gravity sapped energy from the expansion and recycled it back to the Higgs field (perhaps more accurately, the Higgs field is a parasite on attractive gravitational energy).59 In simple words, although the Higgs field rolled down the energy hill, it still managed to hold on to all of its energy (in the form of constant energy density over vastly more voluminous space). Then, as this energetic Higgs field cooled, its energy underwent a transition and became an almost uniform ocean of matter and radiation across the new voluminous universe. This explains all the matter and energy in our present universe. I said that the distribution of matter and radiation in the universe was almost but not completely uniform. The reason is that before the expansion there had been quantum fluctuations inside the space nugget, and these quantum non-uniformities came to be writ large across the expanded universe (just as tiny wiggly lines drawn by marker on a balloon stretch clear across its surface as it is blown up). Thus, the Higgs field had energy bumps here and there (separated by enormous gulfs of uniform energy distribution) that cooled into relatively high densities of matter, and these came to attract more matter and become lumpier and lumpier. The lumps became the billions of galaxies separated by enormous gulfs of space-energy that we witness in the sky today.60

Let me say something about light speed. The expansion of our space nugget by a factor of $10^{30}$ by conservative estimates and $10^{100}$ by liberal estimates (this factor depends on the shape of the energy function in Figure 2) is literally fantastic. Even if we go with the conservative $10^{30}$, this is akin to a DNA molecule becoming the size of the Milky Way galaxy in $10^{35}$ seconds. Obviously, this expansion occurred at super superluminal speed (many times faster than light) and so we may wonder what happened to the speed limit of c set by special relativity. The answer is that that speed limit applies only on the streets inside space-time. Nothing can go faster than light when travelling through space-time. However, space-time itself is not subject to this restriction. Its expansion occurs on the supra-universe highway where superluminal speeds seem to be a way of life. You may conjecture that quantum entanglement ought to be given a similar explanation (see Appendix 2). The instantaneous communication between entangled particles could be explained by their access to the supra-universe highway. Crucially, this also solves a theological problem. If God is infinite space-energy, then He will need some superfast way of communicating instructions to remote corners of his existential self. I propose that He has access to the supra-universe highway. Of course, I should venture to say that in some sense He is the supra-universe highway.

Let me also say a word on grand unification in physics (where the concept originated) before we enter the quagmire of time. I mentioned earlier that there are four fundamental forces of nature and that each force has a messenger particle. These particles are: gluons for the strong
force, photons for the electromagnetic force, W and Z particles for the weak force, and gravitons for the gravitational force. Of these particles, only gravitons have not been experimentally confirmed. Now here is something to write home about. The fantastic expansion of space lasted an incredible $10^{35}$ seconds after the bang (ATB). But during the $10^{35}$ seconds, physicists believe that three of the four forces of nature were one and the same force. Before this $10^{35}$ second shaving of time had lapsed, there was no way to tell the difference between a gluon, a photon, and W and Z particles. A profound symmetry existed in that these particles all had the same properties. Just as a snowflake rotated point to point looks exactly the same (symmetry means that its points are interchangeable), gluons, photons, and W and Z particles were interchangeable with each other and exchanging one for another made no difference whatsoever in the embryonic universe. All of these particles were essentially photons by nature since they were all mass-less and moving at the speed of light. They were messenger particles of a single grand unified force of nature that was a reality at the unimaginably high temperatures during the $10^{35}$ seconds ATB. I hope that we can all see what this means. It could be that, at the end of the day, there is fundamentally only one real force of nature (and maybe only one real indivisible form of energy). This is something that could have serious theological implications. But then why is it that today we discover that the particles we call gluons, photons, and W and Z particles have different properties from each other? Why is it that if they are fundamentally the same, they exhibit different properties? Well, $10^{35}$ seconds ATB the temperature of the universe had vastly cooled (down to $10^{28}$ degrees Kelvin which is only some thousand billion billion times the temperature at the core of the sun). This vast plunge in temperature resulted in the condensation of a new Higgs field that was stable because it was not poised on the hilltop but rather resting in the valley (see Figure 2). This field is called the grand unified Higgs and is not to be mistaken with the Higgs field that was responsible for the bang. Before $10^{35}$ seconds had lapsed ATB, temperatures had been far too high to allow the grand unified Higgs to condense and it had been a violently fluctuating field of energy. But after $10^{35}$ seconds, the temperature was just right and the grand unified Higgs did condense settling in the valley (Figure 2). The point to note is that the interaction of this condensed field with gluons of the strong force was different from its interaction with other particles. This discriminatory treatment of gluons by the grand unified Higgs resulted in the separation of the strong force from the single unified force of nature. We now had at least two separate forces – the strong force and the electroweak force (electromagnetic and weak forces were still unified as one). And that is not the end of the story. The temperature of the universe continued to plunge and $10^{12}$ seconds ATB it was down to $10^{15}$ degrees Kelvin (a mere 100 million times the temperature at the core of the sun). This temperature was just right for another brand new Higgs field to condense called the electroweak Higgs. Its claim to fame is that it interacts with W and Z particles but not with photons. The interaction with W and Z particles is so strong that it gives them an inertial mass of 86 and 97 times that of a proton, respectively. In fact, with the Higgs field physicists have an explanation for the origins of mass. A photon is mass-less because it does not interact with the electroweak Higgs, while W and Z particles have mass because they experience resistance when swimming through the electroweak Higgs. Furthermore, the electroweak Higgs also resists the motion of quarks and electrons that are the basic constituents of all atoms and this gives all the other objects in the universe their inertial mass. The resistance experienced by the W and Z particles but not by photons separated the weak force from the electromagnetic force. As a result, we now have three forces of nature (strong, weak, and electromagnetic) in addition to gravity. Meanwhile,
the photons of the electromagnetic force zip through space unimpeded by any Higgs field. Or is there some other field that we are unaware of that limits their speed, and that of everything else, to c?

The Problem of Time

Time is asymmetric. It flows in only one direction from past to future. We have memories of the past and experiences in the present but we neither have memories of the future nor any experience of it for now. We have physical and mental records of the past but none of the future. We never experience the same moment twice. No moment past or present is ever re-lived. So what is this incessant flow from past to present to future? What is time?

While it is difficult to arrive at a definition of time in a direct way it is possible to see how time is related to other things. I will first consider the relation between time and change. It seems impossible to imagine time without change. One discovers that time is a stage only because the drama of change is always playing on it. If that were not so, then the stage would have no purpose, but more importantly, it may have no meaning. Is it possible for a moment of time to pass without any change anywhere? What would be the meaning of such a moment, of such an empty period of time? If the universe were empty and static there would be no change in it. What then would time be good for, what would it record? There is a strong sense in which time depends on change. The following conditional seems true: if time then change (i.e., change is a necessary condition for the passage of time). Would Newton, with his view of time as absolute, have disagreed with all of this? Well, Newton may have said that there is only an epistemological problem in considering time without change. If there is no change anywhere then there may be no way to know of the passage of time. However, that does not mean that time does not pass in an ontological sense. In other words, there could be empty periods of time in which nothing happens, and I mean absolutely nothing, not so much as an electromagnetic vibration anywhere. Because we can never know of the existence of such absolute time, I will simply ignore it. It may be that the ease with which we can ignore certain concepts also points to their lack of reality.

So I accept that time depends on change. What about the opposite direction, does change depend on time? A thing changes from one moment to the next. It is simply impossible for something to change without the passage of a moment of time. Change can be defined in terms of time. Change is an event or process that must occur in time. So we have the conditional: if change then time, and we can make the usual move to the bi-conditional: time if and only if change. This is hardly different from 11: time if and only if energy. That figures because change and energy have an intrinsic connection. It is self-evident that there can be no energy without change because for anything to be disturbed (and energetic) it has to change (its position if nothing else). It is also self-evident that there can be no change without energy because for anything to be transformed there has to be some energetic transaction. In this way, the interdependence of time and change is sealed by 11. Time has something to do with existential change. As I believe that God-energy-space-time or, saying it differently, consciousness-energy-space-time is the absolute background in which existential change occurs I propose that time is the conscious experience of existential change. We will need to know more to decide whether this can be a definition of time but I hope you will see that a
philosophical approach is deeper and more realistic than any theoretical physics has offered to date.

The laws of physics, regardless of whether they were articulated by Newton, Maxwell, or Einstein, do not give any consideration to the asymmetry of time that is part and parcel of common experience. As far as physical laws are concerned, time has no direction. Things that happen in one sequence can happen in the reverse sequence all the while continuing to obey the laws of physics. If I throw a ball from Earth to Mars, the same ball could retrace the journey in reverse order from Mars to Earth. All we have to do is apply the necessary forces (in this case, if we simply throw the ball from Mars back to Earth). At every point in the return journey the ball will have identical speeds (in the opposite direction) as it did in the outward journey. Physical laws don’t care a whit about the direction of the sequence. A much starker example is that of an egg rolling off the kitchen counter and splattering on the floor. The egg fell to the floor because of gravity, its shell cracked into numerous bits because of impact with the floor, and the yoke and white splattered all over because of the momentum of every blob. But as far as physical laws are concerned, all of this can happen in reverse, as long as we apply the necessary forces. If we can arrange for a vast multitude of forces to gather every blob in order to recollect the yoke and white, and simultaneously fuse the broken shell bits over them, and then finally lift the egg off the floor and gently roll it back onto the counter, the laws of physics wouldn’t lose any sleep over this. While this would be an astonishingly complex (and not to mention practically impossible) undertaking, as far as physics is concerned, it is business as usual. It is just another day at work, just one more application of physical laws because, while these laws consider the duration of events, they are not sensitive to the direction of time. I sometimes walk to the grocery store but the laws of physics couldn’t care less if I were instead in the habit of walking in reverse back to my house.

Complex systems such as the egg on the kitchen counter have an overwhelming tendency towards states of higher disorder. An egg could easily splatter but it never un-splatters. The universe is a system that is far more complex than the egg and so the relentless drive towards increasing entropy is all the more true of it. I mentioned earlier that this incessant increase in universal entropy has given rise to the idea that the direction of time may be determined by the direction of entropy. Time may simply be a measure of increasing entropy. The difference between this moment and the next is that there has been a change in the universe towards a state of higher entropy. The pre-bang universe was characterized by a state of low entropy when the Higgs field was poised on the hilltop (see Figure 2). While entropy increased during the $10^{-35}$ second bang, its rate of increase was small because of a fantastic expansion that created enormous stretches of uniform (low entropy) space. But entropy increase began in earnest when the uniformly distributed matter-energy began to clump together in a process that would eventually result in the formation of galaxies. Ever since, the entropy of the universe has always increased at a significant rate and the theory of time that is on offer here is that time is the measure of this relentless increase in disorder.

And there is an added twist. Keep in mind that the laws of physics do not discriminate between past and future (as far as physics is concerned you can make even a splattered egg whole again). This non-discriminatory policy means that if entropy is high in the future then it must also be high in the past. Basically, regardless of past or future, there is always an overwhelming probability that entropy will be high (because disordered states vastly outnumber ordered
In other words, physical laws (flying in the face of common experience) see time as symmetric and so if entropy is high in the future then it must also be high in the past. If you happen to find yourself in a low entropy state in the present, then in all probability entropy will be higher in the future, and, here’s the twist, it was also higher in the past.

In this way, entropy explains the primordial space-energy soup that existed before the big bang. The bang itself was the result of a low entropy high potential energy Higgs field poised on the hilltop (like a vase on a window sill the Higgs field was highly ordered). At all future moments ATB, entropy was higher. But because of the time symmetry of physical laws, if entropy was higher in the future it was also higher in the past. So what was there in the high entropy past before the bang? Yes, it was the disorderly bubbling primordial soup. So here is the story of our beginnings. Like lightning out of a clear blue sky, there was a random quantum fluctuation in an ultramicroscopic nugget of space inside the high entropy primordial soup. This fluctuation perched the Higgs field (inside the nugget) on its hilltop in an incredibly rare state of low entropy. Remember, if you wait long enough that will happen. Then, the Higgs field rolled down the hill, in other words, the space nugget banged. This bang was a fantastic \(10^{35}\) second expansion and entropy has been increasing ever since. The theory of time that we are currently examining is that time is a measure of the increase in entropy ever since the bang. Not surprisingly, this is a deeply problematic view of time.

I will make three objections. First, if time is the measure of entropy increase after the bang, then that must mean that time did not exist before the bang. More substantively, I imagine that the chaotic primordial soup was always chaotic and not increasing in its chaos, so that entropy had no direction before the bang. Yet, we are given to believe that the rare quantum fluctuation that perched the Higgs field on the hilltop is the kind of thing that will happen if given enough time. But there is no time before the bang. So in what sense could there be a rare quantum fluctuation if given enough time. Remember that on this view time measures entropy increase but before the bang there was no increase in entropy to measure. This is because there was only a disorderly primordial soup that neither increased nor decreased (in any discernible way) in its state of disorder. Whither time and whither probability over time before the bang? With no probability over time how could there be a temporally improbable fluctuation that made the bang possible?

My second objection is that there is a weird disconnect between our conscious experience of time and the physicist’s definition of time as a measure of increasing entropy. Let’s say that I spend my life in a utopian city that is highly ordered in every way. Things are so well ordered that I often forget that there is continually a net increase in entropy in the universe as a whole. In other words, I often forget that my low entropy environment is merely a localized phenomenon and the rest of the universe is going to hell in a hand basket. But notice one thing. The fact that I am not aware of the increasing net entropy of the universe makes no difference to my conscious awareness of the passage of time. The seconds, minutes, hours, and days still pass as they always have. What should we make of this inexplicable disconnect between my conscious experience of time and time as a measure of entropy? It may be that time is a measure of entropy (in some sense) but that it is also much else besides.

My third objection is more philosophical. We always observe, and physicists always tell us, that complex systems have an overwhelming tendency to move from states of low entropy to states of high entropy. If they are already in states of high entropy then they stay that way. But
the basic point is that things move from order (low entropy) to disorder (high entropy). My question is: why don’t we take this observation to heart? And I mean, why don’t we take every aspect of this observation to heart? Why don’t we take to heart the view that when things move they always move towards the future and never towards the past. Why don’t we say that things increase in entropy as they move to the future? This would mean that whenever we discover a state of low entropy then it must be preceded by a state of even lower entropy because entropy always increases towards the future (and decreases towards the past). If we follow this to its logical conclusion, a journey into the past may bring us to a state of zero entropy. This would be far truer to the spirit of common experience because the experiential fact is that entropy always increases in the future direction. Instead, physicists fly in the face of common experience by insisting on the symmetry of time that erases its direction and gives an overwhelming probability that whatever the time (past or future) things will be in a state of high entropy. In such an obvious case as this, why not privilege common experience over physical laws especially when the physical laws are actually mute on the subject of time. If we were to privilege common experience instead, then we could say that because the universe was in a state of low entropy with the Higgs field poised on the hilltop just before the bang, earlier in time it would have had to be in a state of even lower entropy. In other words, there would be no high entropy primordial soup but rather a state of really low entropy, may be even a state of zero entropy. In fact, this could be a further theistic argument, this time from entropy. I propose that God is in a state of zero entropy (absolute order) and that the low entropy Higgs field perched on the hilltop is His work. If we could accept this then it would have the advantage that time would exist even before the bang. Getting from zero entropy to low entropy is an increase in entropy and would take time assuming the physicist’s definition of time as a measure of entropy increase. However, with God in the picture we may no longer need the physicist’s definition because we are now much closer to the definition that I gave earlier. Time is the conscious experience of existential change.

Modern physics is responsible for another deeply problematic view of time. The source of this problem is Einstein’s relativistic view of constant velocity motion and the consequences of this view for simultaneity. The problem is straightforward to understand. Along with a couple of friends, I have decided to hunt for pirate treasure in outer space. A space map has told us where to look for ‘treasure island’ (a floating space rock that has buried treasure). We have agreed on a rendezvous in the vicinity of the island, but when I arrive at that point in space my friends are still not there. Soon enough, I see one of them not so far away but zipping right past me at a constant velocity of 1000 mph (the jet packs on our spacesuits automatically switch off at this speed). According to the map, this friend of mine is headed off in direction A. No problem though, because I can contact him by mobile phone. But before I get a chance to do that, I catch sight of my other friend, and he is also zipping right past me at a constant velocity of 1000 mph but in the opposite direction - direction B (according to the map). Once again, this is not a problem because he also has a mobile on him. When I call the first of them (who is off in direction A) he tells me that he is at rest and that his speedometer reads 0 mph. He also says that he caught sight of me and that I was headed off in direction B at a constant velocity of 1000 mph. I want to tell him that his speedometer is not working and that he is the one who is moving and that I am at rest. But then I worry that maybe it is my speedometer (it also reads 0) that is not working. In any case, according to special relativity both of our perspectives are valid. I am right in saying that he is going in direction A while he is right in saying that I am going in direction B. This is the relativity of constant velocity motion. Not sure
how to proceed, I decide to call my other friend who is off at a 1000 mph in direction B (from my perspective). He tells me the same story. From his perspective, it is I who is moving at a 1000 mph in direction A. Now here is the problem. According to my first friend, I am moving at a 1000 mph in direction B, but according to my second friend, I am moving in the opposite direction at the same speed! Can both statements be true at the same time? According to special relativity the answer is yes. But let’s try to use common sense instead. Obviously, it is not possible for both my friends to be right because I cannot head off in opposite directions at the same time. There is something the matter with special relativity and its view of the relativity of constant velocity motion.

In order to arrange the meeting at our rendezvous, I call my first friend again (remember he is going in direction A) and coolly explain to him that I am the one at rest because the stars that I see in the distance are not moving. In other words, I am at rest relative to the whole universe. But I quickly realize that my patronizing tone has ticked him off and so I am not surprised when he tells me that from his perspective the distant stars are not at rest at all but are also moving at a 1000 mph in direction B! I frantically search for a response in my special relativity toolkit but there is none to be had. With his stubborn insistence that he is at rest my friend is not violating anything in special relativity. It looks as though the treasure hunt is off. With growing impatience, I call my second friend and tell him that I am at rest and that I don’t want any further discussion on the point. Whatever it is in my tone, my second friend flatly contradicts me and says that he is the one at rest and that from his perspective the distant stars are moving by him at a 1000 mph in direction A! As I brood over the matter, it occurs to me that there has to be something wrong with special relativity. How can the universe move in direction B at a 1000 mph (as my first friend insists) and at the same time move in the opposite direction at the same speed (as my second friend insists)? Worse, how can it do both of those things and still be at rest as I maintain? But as far as special relativity is concerned, all three of us are right. Once again, we have a case where if you don’t see a problem then there is something psychologically and culturally the matter with you.

It is possible to conjecture that Einstein resolved this contradiction in special relativity by introducing space-time as an absolute entity. While space is relative to time and time to space the two of them together are absolute. Remember that the water in the bucket spins relative to absolute space-time. Can’t we then say that the universe (i.e., absolute space-time) is not moving at all but rather my friends are moving relative to me and that I am at rest? But if we do that then my friends cannot rightly claim to be at rest and so what will happen to the treasured view of the relativity of constant velocity motion? That this problem remains unresolved is confirmed by special relativity’s view on simultaneity and the very odd picture of time that it gives us.

Imagine that you are on a bullet train that is travelling at a constant speed of 300 mph relative to the platform. By special relativity, you can claim to be at rest saying that the platform is moving in the opposite direction. Let’s say that you decide to synchronize a couple of clocks that are at the two ends of your carriage. The method you choose is the following. You will switch on a light bulb in the middle of the carriage and when the light from it reaches the two clocks they are programmed to automatically set their time to 12 noon. I am sitting on a bench on the platform and catch sight of your synchronization apparatus. Realizing that there is a problem, I call you on your mobile. I explain that by your method the clocks will not get
synchronized because the light will reach one of the clocks before the other. The reason is that the clock at the back of the carriage is travelling at 300 mph towards the point of light emission from the bulb while the one at the front is travelling at the same speed away from that point. Light will reach the former clock before it reaches the latter and so the former will be set ahead of the latter. You laugh at my Newtonian innocence and tell me that there is no problem because the train is at rest. Neither clock is moving relative to the point of light emission and so both clocks will be set simultaneously. As expected, special relativity affirms that both observers (you and I) are saying the right thing. It is only that simultaneity is a relative notion and what is simultaneous for a person in a moving train will not be so for someone on the platform. This is the relativity of simultaneity. But let me warn you, it is one fruitcake of a concept.

To see why, first note that the faster the train moves the more the clocks will be out of sync for an observer on the platform. This is because the clock at the back of the carriage will move faster towards the light emission (thereby being set even earlier) while the one at the front will move faster away from the light emission (thereby being set even later). As a result, the time difference between them will be greater. Second, note also that the longer the carriage the more the clocks will be out of sync for a platform observer. This is because the clock at the back will have more time to travel towards the light emission while the one in front will have more time to travel away from the light emission (thereby being set relatively later than the one at the back). Thus, greater distance and/or relative speed will create a greater disparity in the experience of the two observers. No matter how long the carriage or how fast the train, the observer on it will continue to see the clocks as simultaneous. But with greater distance and/or relative speed the observer on the platform will experience greater disparity between the clocks. This fact gives us some really wild results about time.

In special relativity, the Lorentz transformation laws mentioned in Appendix 2 give us the relation between the times of observers in relative motion. The equation in Appendix 2 includes the times of both observers (t and t’) but not the distance between them. As we want to consider what happens over vast distances we write the law as follows:

\[ t' = (t - ux)/v(1 - u^2) \]

\( u \) is relative velocity and \( x \) is distance between observers)

The units being used for the speed of light set \( c = 1 \) and that is the reason \( c \) is not shown in the equation. The relative velocity, \( u \), between observers will obviously be less than \( c \) (i.e., \( u < 1 \)). As I said in the last paragraph, the greater \( u \) and \( x \) are the greater will be the disparity between what these observers see as simultaneous events. So let’s see what happens when \( x \) is large. A person living on a planet in some other galaxy is at a distance of \( x = 100 \) million light-years from me. He is flying in a Concorde at 0.0000015c in a direction diametrically away from me (i.e., the distance between us is increasing and so \( u = 0.0000015c \) is a positive velocity). Now let’s plug these values into 15. We can ignore the denominator on the right hand side because that is virtually equal to 1 (i.e., \( v(1 - u^2) = v(1 - (0.0000015 \times 0.0000015)) = 1 \)). So his time \( t' = t - ux = t - (0.0000015 \times 100,000,000) = t - 150 \) years. In other words, if I set my \( t = 0 \) as the year 0 A.D. then when my time is \( t = 2010 \) A.D. his time \( t' = 2010 - 150 = 1860 \) A.D.!75

Let me tell you what this means in English. The person flying in the Concorde 100 million light-years away from me is actually a contemporary of Abraham Lincoln! His Concorde flight is simultaneous with Lincoln’s election as U.S President in the year 1860! If you don’t feel this is
ridiculous enough for you then try the next one on for size. If the Concorde is flying towards me rather than away from me then the relative velocity is negative (\(u = -0.0000015c\)) and so \(t' = t + u = t + 150\) years. This means that when my time is \(t = 2010\) A.D. then his time is \(t' = 2010 + 150 = 2160\) A.D. In English, this says that even as I now write this sentence, the person in the Concorde flying towards me is a contemporary of the U.S President-elect in the year 2160 (yes, that is an election year)! For me his Concorde flight is simultaneous with my typing the word ‘simultaneous’, but because simultaneity is relative, for him his Concorde flight is simultaneous with the U.S. President-elect making his acceptance speech in 2160! And yes, this means that the U.S President-elect in 2160 is a real person, that is, the President-elect is real even now, even as I say the word ‘wonderland’. While physicists may feel that this is a wondrous discovery (and I think many believe it because they have learned to trust their equations more than their gut), for the rest of us it is a stark reminder that we should not leave them to steer the ship of physics in any direction their hearts desire. My view is that the theory of relativity has got a hold of some concept, but whatever that concept may be, it is not the concept of time.

Earlier I suggested that maybe the theory of relativity has incorrectly applied the label of time to the rate of entropy increase. The clocks on a moving train may be ticking slower not because time is moving slower but rather because they are recording a slower rate of entropy increase. The observer on the train should not insist that he is in a state of rest because it takes a substantial energy input to slow entropy down in this way. All the energy that the bullet train consumed to attain its 300 mph speed has gone to slowing down the rate of entropy increase for the train (in the way that a fridge’s energy consumption slows the entropy increase of a banana). The train’s energy consumption should be taken as evidence of the fact that the train is not at rest. Thus, while entropy increase has slowed, time, whatever that may be, is in no way effected by the train ride. As long as the observer on the train takes his slower clocks to be symptomatic of slower entropy increase, he will come to see that he is not at rest. As a result, he will not insist that his clock synchronization worked. He will agree with the platform observer that his clocks were not set simultaneously. He will not insist on a relative concept of simultaneity where for him the clocks are simultaneously set but for the platform observer they are not. I suggest that both time and simultaneity are not relative but rather absolute concepts. Let’s see what that would look like from a theological perspective.

The theological view that I am advancing is that because God is interdependent with energy (4 and 8) and because energy is interdependent with time (11), God and time are interdependent. Another way to see this is that because I am advancing (a grand unified) God-energy-space-time as my view of God, it is necessary that for me time is co-eternal with God and energy. If it is an energy field that is the basis for God’s existence then the same field is also the basis for the existence of time. Time is absolute in that it has always ticked away with every energetic motion in the divine energy field. There was never God without time and there was never a time without God. In a very clear way, I am saying that God is time because time is a dimension of his very being. From this, we can further conclude that simultaneity is also absolute. This is because we can assume that certain energetic motions in the divine field occur together and are thus simultaneous. For example, let’s say that God fires a couple of photons in opposite directions. Both photons (as they travel at the same speed) will be equidistant from their point of origin at the same time. This is from God’s perspective which I assume is absolute. When one photon is 1 light-year from the point of origin then the other
will simultaneously be 1 light-year from that point also (in the opposite direction). Thus, event A (first photon passing the 1 light-year mark from point of origin) is simultaneous with event B (second photon passing 1 light-year mark from point of origin) in an absolute sense. Motion relative to the point of origin could distort this fact but it could never change it. Thus, an observer in relative motion has a distorted view of simultaneity and this distorted view does not have equal validity as special relativity maintains. Anything that happens in our universe as the first photon passes the 1 light-year mark is simultaneous with event A (and event B) in an absolute sense.

There is, however, one formidable problem that stands in the way of the co-eternity of God and time so let’s turn our attention to it. God has an eternal past and so (by our assumption) time has also existed for an eternal period in the past. If so, we will need to find a response to an argument offered by the Christain philosopher, John Philoponus, against the Greek notion of an infinite past.76 Basically, his argument is that if there were an infinite number of past moments then we could never have arrived at the present because it is not possible to complete an infinite count (in this case, of past moments). This is a profound and in my view invincible argument that was adopted by many philosophers including the Muslim philosopher Al-Kindi (Alkindus); the Jewish philosopher, Saadia Gaon (Saadia ben Joseph); and the Muslim theologian, Al-Ghazali (Algazel); and in more recent times by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The argument is so important that it ought to be stated formally:

a. An actual infinite cannot be completed by successive addition.

b. The temporal series of past events has been completed by successive addition.

c. Therefore, the temporal series of past events cannot be an actual infinite.

The argument says that if there is an infinite series of past moments then we could not be standing here right now. If my view of God as time is wedded to the view of God as eternal then I seem to be saying that time (with God) is eternal or infinite. So if I am claiming an infinite ‘temporal series of past events’ then I simply have no answer to Philoponus’s fatal argument.

Here is what I will do. I will make a set of statements that I believe to be true and defend them from the point of view of the theology that I am proposing.

A. God has always existed.

This is true because God is time, and so there never was a time without Him. In other words, God has existed in every moment of time and so He has always existed. Keep in mind that the word ‘always’ is a temporal concept.

B. The number of moments of past time is finite.

If the past is finite then this obviously means that God has existed for a finite time. To say that again, God does not have an infinite past. How does this square with A, with the statement that God has always existed. Well, for every moment of past time (and B tells us that these moments are finite) God has existed and so he has always existed. There is no contradiction between A and B, rather it is simply that the word ‘always’ is a temporal concept and so it ranges over every moment of time. If past time had infinite moments, then ‘has always existed’ means the same as ‘has existed for every moment of infinite past time’. But if past
time has finite moments (as B maintains), then ‘has always existed’ means the same as ‘has existed for every moment of finite past time’. Together, A and B are saying that God has existed at every moment of time, and so He has always existed, but the moments of past time are finite. God has existed for all of finite time, in other words, he has always existed.

But then what should we make of the difficult concept of eternity. Well, eternal can have one of three meanings. In one meaning, it is temporal infinity and in that sense God is not eternal in the past because B rejects an infinite past. In another meaning, it is timelessness and in that sense God is not eternal in the past because, on my view, God is time. In a third meaning, it has the meaning of existing at all times and in that sense God is eternal in the past. Thus, when I say that God is eternal I am using the third meaning of eternal. Remember that ‘eternal’ is also a temporal concept but it is one that is usually seen as making an assumption about the nature of time. An eternal past is usually assumed to mean an infinite past. So the word is loaded from the get go. However, my point is that eternity and infinity need not be wedded in this way. In fact, we usually accept that eternity could also mean timelessness rather than infinity. Moreover, eternity could also be construed as all of time and something eternal as that which exists at all times. My point is that I should be allowed to say that God has an eternal past even though I am neither saying that there is an infinite past nor that God is timeless. All I am saying is that He has existed at all times and there never was in the (finite) past a moment without Him.

My assumption that God has a finite past (although He has always existed) gets me beyond the Philoponus argument. But, of course, it has created a disquieting new problem. If God has a finite past, then what happened in the first moment of His life? I believe that I have an adequate response. My response is that nothing special happened in the first moment. Things were then the same with God as they are now. Of course, he had not yet created the universe, but in Himself He was as complete as He is now. The only reason that we call it the first moment is because we can theoretically rewind all the way to that moment and no further. There is no such thing as ‘before the first moment’ because ‘before’ is a temporal concept that exists because God exists. Neither God nor time came into existence because it takes time for something to come into existence and there was no time before.... oops, there was no before to speak of. Thus, the first moment is the first because we can rewind to it. At that moment we discover God as consciousness, energy, space, and time. No surprises. It is not possible to rewind further. This is the reason that God is the ultimate reality.

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., pp. 27-8
5 I propose that it may be in some sense necessary that there be a sufficient reason for the existence of energy and that it may be in some sense necessary that God be that sufficient reason. So in some sense of necessary, God is necessary for the existence of energy. That is how I arrive at 3.
We have witnessed that what goes on in Descartes’ head does not determine reality. Like imaginings, beliefs are also in the head and do not determine reality. Say that Descartes believes that a friend will visit him soon. However, Descartes does not believe that this friend will be of Russian origin. Surely, that does not establish as a fact that the friend who visits Descartes will not be of Russian origin. What goes on in Descartes’ head (in this case, his beliefs about his friend) does not determine the reality of his friend’s origins. Descartes may simply not have known that his friend had a Russian mother. Similarly, Descartes’ imaginings (what goes on in his head) do not establish mind/body dualism as a reality.

Look at a parallel argument. I can imagine that I am deceived about my identity as Babar Ahmed (it is easy enough to make up a story as to how I came to be deceived about that). However, I cannot imagine that I do not exist (as long as I am thinking, I must exist). Does it follow that, just because I can imagine being deceived about the first thing (identity) but not about the second (existence), Babar Ahmed and I are distinct? Obviously, there is something wrong with this argument because the fact is that I am Babar Ahmed and my ability to imagine that I am deceived about that doesn’t change the fact. Similarly, Descartes’ ability to imagine that he could be deceived about his body, but not about his mind cannot establish as a fact that his body is distinct from his mind.

Descartes would have used the word immaterial rather than nonphysical but I will assume that he would have agreed with the non-physicality of mind.


Nietzsche usually appears to advocate the Type-Epiphenomenalism outlined in this sentence that places consciousness in the causal chain but gives it no power as a change agent. Sometimes, however, he seems to advance the more radical Token-Epiphenomenalism by which consciousness is not even in the causal chain but merely a by-product of psychophysical events. The body acts first and informs the conscious mind later. Consciousness is reduced to being a mere spectator and has even lost the powerless figurehead status that it had in Type-Epiphenomenalism. See Leiter, *Nietzsche*, p. 91-2.


Leiter, *Nietzsche*, p. 101

Ibid., p. 100

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 94


Ibid., p. 41

Ibid., pp. 57, 131, 184

Ibid., p. 57

Ibid., pp. 35-9

Ibid., p. 41

Ibid., p. 38

Leiter, *Nietzsche*, p. 93

Donald, *A Mind So Rare*, p. 183


Ibid., pp. 205-6


Ibid., pp. 329-31

Ibid

This was established through experimental verification of the *Casimir* force. See Greene, *Fabric*, pp. 331-2.

While quantum entanglement seems to fly in the face of this last observation, most physicists agree that entanglement should not be interpreted so as to establish the result that energy travels through space instantaneously (in no time at all and at an infinite speed). The usual interpretation is that if something does travel instantaneously between entangled particles, it is not energy (actually the usual interpretation is probably that nothing *travels* instantaneously between entangled particles and it is altogether something else that must explain their perfect correlation across great distances). Thus, neither logic nor modern physics has any objection to 9. Logic demands it and modern physics is built on it. See Appendix 4.
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See Greene, Fabric, p. 32.
Greene, Fabric, p. 23
Ibid., pp. 26-8
Newton's actual launch was into 'deep, cold, completely empty space'. See Greene, Fabric, p. 27.
The example is from Greene, Fabric p. 32.
Greene, Fabric, pp. 34-5.
Assume that your eyeballs have a thin plastic coating so they don’t feel either water or air.
Greene, Fabric, pp. 36-7.
The first law is the conservation of energy.
See Appendix 4 for a detailed treatment of these issues.
We can complete the analogy with the banana in the fridge. If you place one banana (from the same bunch) outside the fridge then it will become a measure of how much slower the rate of entropy increase is for the banana in the fridge because the banana outside will decay faster compared to the one inside. Of course, if you put both bananas in the fridge, then you cannot have this kind of measurement by comparison. This is analogous to your clock which is accelerating with you (both you and the clock are in the fridge as it were) and so your clock cannot show you that your rate of entropy increase has slowed down.
For the more conventional view that you can have an empty universe see Greene, Fabric p. 74-5.
The field is so named after the Scottish physicist Peter Higgs.
Greene, Fabric, p. 524.
Ibid., pp. 276-7
Ibid., p. 278
Ibid., pp. 276-7
Ibid., pp. 310-1
Ibid., p. 281
Ibid., pp. 272-3
See Filkin, David, Stephen Hawking’s Universe: The Cosmos Explained, London: BBC Books, 1997, pp. 110-1. Filkin: “So, although the Big Bang theory won wide acceptance during the relatively brief period of those 50 years [ca. 1927-1977], it is still not universally accepted even today. After all, it is hard enough to believe that the vast variety of our own planet – its mountains and oceans, its plants and animal life, including ourselves – could all have grown from a singularity, something somehow smaller than an atom and yet immensely dense. And even this hugely complex immense amount of matter is but a tiny drop in the ocean; if Big Bang theory is correct, then it must have spawned, as well as our Earth, all the matter which makes up all the other planets surrounding our sun, which is just one tiny star amongst billions of stars in one galaxy. One single galaxy amongst billions of galaxies, all created from a singularity and racing away from each other at colossal speeds as the universe continues to expand some fifteen billion years after it began.”
According to one estimate the mass of the observable (visible) universe is 1.6x10^{55} kg. But most of the universe is made up of dark matter. See http://hypertextbook.com/facts/2006/KristineMcPherson.shtml
Greene, Fabric, p. 312.
Ibid., pp. 312-3
Ibid
Ibid., pp. 314-5
Ibid., pp. 266-8
This is known as gauge symmetry. See Greene, Fabric, p. 265.
Greene, Fabric, p. 267.
Ibid., pp. 264-6
Ibid., pp. 264-6
Ibid., pp. 261-3
In the outward journey, it accelerated in the gravitational field of Mars before hitting the surface. As it is launched from Mars back to Earth in a reverse sequence, it decelerates in the gravitational field of Mars. You can easily see that the speeds on both journeys will be identical (in the opposite direction) at identical points.
Ibid., pp. 160-1
Ibid., pp. 164-5
70 Ibid., p. 318
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., pp. 164-5
73 Ibid., pp. 55-6
74 Ibid., pp. 134-7
75 Ibid., pp. 136-7
76 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_space_and_time
Appendix 4

The Physics of God

In Appendix 3, we have said that energy is the causal basis for divine will and consciousness. Is it possible to be more specific than that? If we could isolate the possible basic building blocks of God that would make the possibility of His existence all the more real and would go a long way in support of theism. What types of fundamental energy do we know of that could play this vital role? According to modern physics, what is the smallest indivisible unit of energy? Our options are limited by the fact that most of the 19 elementary particles in the standard model of particle physics have mass. We don’t want to build God using a massive particle. To say that God has mass would be something of an aesthetic faux pas. Not only that, we would have considerable difficulty revising Figure 1 of Appendix 3. Thought can conceivably generate energy but it would be strange indeed to say that it generates mass. Neither does mass directly generate thought but rather it is the motion energy of mass that is the basis for thought in animals. So it would be quite embarrassing to attempt to make room for mass in Appendix 3: Figure 1. It would certainly be no less embarrassing than going with your parents to the high school prom. Important as they are, you would be far happier if they were at home watching television.

1. An Obvious Choice

So we want a mass-less particle that we know enough about so that we can use it for our hypothetical physical construction of God. The three natural contenders would be the gluon (particle of the strong force), the photon (particle of the electromagnetic force), and the graviton (particle of the gravitational force). While the graviton has some appealing properties it is ruled out because there is no experimental confirmation of it and we want our construction to be based on physics that we already know. In any case, gravitation is a very weak force being about a million billion billion billion (10 ^{42}) times weaker than the electromagnetic force. With the graviton falling by the wayside, the choice left to us is between the gluon and the photon and this could be called, in common colloquialism, a no-brainer. The gluon acts over very tiny nuclear distances and its work is to keep quarks glued together (thus glu-on) inside of protons and neutrons. While the strong force transmitted by gluons is a hundred times stronger than the electromagnetic force transmitted by photons, the minute distances over which it acts makes it an unattractive particle for our lofty purposes. Moreover, the gluon is a much more recent discovery and we know far less about it. By contrast, the photon is both experimentally confirmed and famous. It is the Ibn Battuta of the cosmos, an Odysseus whose journey never ends. As the indivisible unit of light it has been the object of study for centuries and spectacular advances were made in the last century in our understanding of its properties. So we have our work cut out for us. We must physically construct God using only photons. This is like asking a carpenter to build a house made only of wood, the use of steel nails, glue, and any other ingredient being strictly disallowed. The challenge is formidable but has the advantage of at least being well defined. The photon has a
couple of fabulous properties that make it really suitable as the atomic basis of divinity. A photon never stops and a photon never ages. Let me explain these properties in turn.

A Photon Never Rests
You are in a Boeing 747 and the screen in front of you displays a cruising speed of 500 miles per hour. You realize that this means that you and the screen and the laptop that you just placed under your seat are all moving at a constant speed of 500 miles per hour relative to the Earth. And yet, all of these things seem to be in a state of rest. The fact is that in the frame of reference of the plane they are in a state of rest. The velocity of these objects is zero relative to the plane. The incredible thing about light is that it is never at rest in any frame of reference. Its speed is never zero relative to anything.

In fact, far from ever being in a state of rest, light does not even slow down to a lower speed. If the Boeing were doing 500 miles per hour at a very low altitude, say just above flat grassland, and someone shot at it from behind so that a 9 mm bullet was giving chase at 680 miles per hour, then the bullet would gain on the plane by the difference of their speeds, i.e. 180 miles per hour. If the plane could pull off 680 mph the bullet would never catch up. Not so with light. A light beam would gain on the Boeing at the same constant speed c regardless of whether the Boeing is at rest or doing 500 mph. Light will always catch up with you because you can never slow it down (it will always gain on you at the same speed, the speed of light that is the universal constant c). In fact, if by magic we could get the Boeing to travel at close to the speed of light then all of our intuitions tell us that from our very high speed frame of reference the light beam chasing us should have a speed lower than c. We are going so fast that the light must surely be moving slower relative to us. But this is not the case. Our intuitions are not fulfilled by a lower speed of light (c is always the same and is not relative to reference frame) but rather by the more mundane fact that we have managed to put some more distance between ourselves and the source of the light beam (this is obvious because the source is standing stationary on the grassland). The light beam gains on us at the constant speed c but because of our motion relative to the light source it has to travel a longer distance to reach us.

All of this means that there is no frame of reference in which light has a speed less than (or more than) c. And it obviously follows that there is no frame of reference in which light is in a state of rest. Photons never slow down. Photons never stop.

It is useful to look at this in another way. An electron is a massive particle that has momentum given by:

1.  \[ p = mv \]  
   \[ (p \text{ is momentum, } m \text{ is mass, } v \text{ is velocity}) \]

Multiplying the right side by \( c^2/c^2 \) we get \[ p = (mc^2) \cdot v/c^2. \] Using \( E = mc^2 \) we can rewrite 1 as:

2.  \[ p = Ev/c^2 \]  
   \[ (E \text{ is total energy, } c \text{ is the speed of light}) \]

It is useful to write the electron’s momentum in this new way because now \( p \) is not expressed in terms of the electron’s mass but rather in terms of its total energy \( E \). According to quantum mechanics, an electron can also behave like a wave and so, because waves have energy not mass, it is useful to carry in our toolkit an expression of the electron’s momentum in terms of energy rather than mass. What is most interesting is that 2 is also an expression for the
momentum of other particles that are similar to electrons in having wavelike properties. The particle we are interested in is the photon. We know that photons have momentum because they can knock an electron off its course. Equation 2 is also an expression of the momentum of the mass-less photon (obviously Equation 1 would be of no use in this regard given that the photon has no mass).

Now because photons are such special particles, 2 can be reduced to something much simpler. Remember that the speed of a photon is equal to c and so we can substitute c in place of v in 2. We get \( p = E/c \) or \( E = pc \). So the total energy \( E \) of a photon is directly proportional to its momentum \( p \). But we can simplify this result even further. We can set the speed of light at a value of 1 by using the appropriate units for distance. The distance light travels in 1 second is 186,000 miles. Let’s introduce a new measure of distance called a *light-second* to refer to the distance light travels in 1 second. In other words, 1 light-second = 186,000 miles. Given our new measure of distance, we can say that the speed of light \( c \) is equal to 1 light-second per second, this being exactly the same as 186,000 miles per second. Thus, \( c = 1 \) if we use the new distance unit of a light-second. Substituting this value into \( E = pc \) we get \( E = \rho \), that is, photon energy \( E \) is proportional to its momentum. This means that all the energy that a photon has is because of its momentum. As there can be no momentum without motion, in simple English this means that all the energy that a photon has is as a result of its motion. If a photon has no momentum or motion, then it has no energy. As a photon simply *is* a packet or quanta of energy, without any momentum or motion (and thus no energy) there would be no photon at all. A photon that is not in motion is not a photon. In contrast to an electron and other massive objects, the mass-less photon has no rest energy given by the famous formula \( E = (\text{mass at rest}) \cdot c^2 \). There is no such thing as a photon at rest. This explains why there is no frame of reference in which you will ever find a photon sleeping on the job. Either you will fail to find a photon or if you find one you will see it moving at the speed of light.

The Planck constant \( h \) was originally discovered as the constant of proportionality between the energy \( E \) of a photon and the frequency \( \nu \) of its associated electromagnetic wave. The following equation is the Planck relation or Planck–Einstein equation:

\[
3. \quad E = h\nu \quad (h \text{ is Planck's constant, } \nu \text{ is frequency})
\]

Higher frequency waves have greater energy. X-rays have a higher frequency than infrared light and thus more energy. The speed of a wave is given by its wavelength \( (\lambda) \) times its frequency \( (\nu) \). Don’t confuse the Greek letter \( \nu \) (nu) with the letter \( \nu \) for velocity. Again, the speed of a wave is the length of each wavelength \( \lambda \) times the number of wavelengths that pass a given point in one second (waves per second or frequency \( \nu \)). This speed \( \nu = \lambda\nu \) is the distance the energy (disturbance) of the wave travels per second. For photons, \( \nu = c = 1 \) (given our new distance unit the light-second) and so \( 1 = \lambda\nu \) or \( \lambda = 1/\nu \). Now Louis de Broglie set down an equation for the wavelength of matter waves (such as electron waves) that was found to apply to photons as well:

\[
4. \quad \lambda = \frac{h}{p}
\]

Combining 4 with \( \lambda = 1/\nu \) we get \( \lambda = \frac{h}{p} = 1/\nu \) and so \( \nu = p = E \). Using 3 we can write \( \nu = p = E \). We thus have independent confirmation that for a photon \( E = p \). A photon is energy and has energy only on the basis of its motion. There is no such thing as a photon at rest.
A Photon Never Ages
We have satisfactorily established that a photon never stops. Let’s turn our attention to that second fabulous property of a photon, the fact that it never ages. To see this, we should begin first by looking at a simple rotation of a frame of reference in ordinary space:

Figure 1

Figure 1 shows two different frames of reference that are rotated by an angle \( \theta \) relative to each other. Let’s say that Joe’s frame of reference is represented by the \( x \) and \( y \) axes while Moe’s frame of reference is represented by the \( x' \) and \( y' \) axes. Thus, Moe’s axes have rotated relative to Joe’s by an angle \( \theta \). The important thing to notice in the figure is that the distance OA shown by the solid line will be the same regardless of how the frame of reference is rotated. In other words, Joe and Moe will measure the same distance for OA. Using Pythagoras’ Theorem we can write this as \( a^2 + b^2 = a'^2 + b'^2 \). Generalizing this observation, we can say that any point \( (x,y) \) in Joe’s reference frame corresponds to a point \( (x',y') \) in Moe’s reference frame such that the distance of that point from the origin as measured in one reference frame is the same as measured in the other, that is, \( x^2 + y^2 = x'^2 + y'^2 \) (note that \( x^2 + y^2 \) is actually not distance but rather distance squared but this makes no difference to the equation). We can also straightforwardly use Pythagoras’ Theorem to generalize the point to ordinary 3-dimensional space and write \( x^2 + y^2 + z^2 = x'^2 + y'^2 + z'^2 \). The line OA could also have represented vectors such as force, velocity, or momentum but the general point will remain the same. Under a rotation (and also under a translation that is not shown here), neither the magnitude nor direction of these vectors will change. Newton’s laws apply regardless of how you rotate or translate the axes or frame of reference.

With frames of reference that are moving relative to each other, Newton’s laws do not apply in the same way across the frames. This is the domain of special relativity. But even with frames of reference in relative motion, some magnitudes and vectors remain the same. In other words, just as distance measured is the same for Joe and Moe even though their frames are rotated relative to each other, according to special relativity there is a magnitude that is the same for Joe and Moe even when the two of them are in relative motion to each other. This magnitude is called an interval in space-time (to distinguish it from distance in ordinary space). We add the time dimension because we are talking about Einstein’s space and time rather than Euclid’s 3-dimensional ordinary space. To pinpoint an event in space-time, for example a
time and place for a meeting, I need to give you 4 coordinates, 3 spatial coordinates to tell you where and 1 time coordinate to tell you when. For example, we could meet at the intersection of 5th street and Madison Avenue (2 dimensions) in my office on the 6th floor (3rd dimension) at 12 noon (4th dimension). Any space-time event can be pinpointed with the 4 coordinates \((x,y,z,t)\). With Joe and Moe in relative motion, Joe will pinpoint an event in space-time as \((x,y,z,t)\) while Moe will pinpoint the same event as \((x',y',z',t')\). The critical point is that the interval (analogous to distance) for a single event is the same regardless of the frame of reference:

5. \[ t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) = t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) \]

Let’s do a simple example. I am smoking a cigar while sitting on a bench in my space station. You whizz by in your fancy new spaceship at half the speed of light \((0.5c)\) and catch sight of me smoking my cigar. Let’s look at my smoking a cigar on a bench from our two different frames of reference. I am stationary in my frame. The event that we’re looking at is defined as follows: a duration of 1 second elapses and I am still sitting in the same place. In other words, I haven’t moved an inch and so if my spatial coordinates were initially \((0,0,0)\) then after 1 second they will still be \((0,0,0)\). However, 1 second has elapsed and so \(t = 1\). Because of this, my 4-dimensional space-time coordinates \((x,y,z,t)\) are no longer \((0,0,0,0)\) but rather \((0,0,0,1)\) showing that 1 second has elapsed. Let’s calculate the interval of this event. The expression \(t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2)\) actually gives us the interval squared (just as \(x^2 + y^2 + z^2\), by Pythagoras’ Theorem, gives us not distance but rather distance squared) but this makes no difference in 5. We get \(t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) = 1^2 - (0^2 + 0^2 + 0^2)\). Thus, the interval squared for the event (my remaining seated on my bench for 1 second) is equal to 1.

Now remember that calculating the interval from your high speed frame of reference should give the same result of 1 because the magnitude of the interval remains invariant regardless of frame (this is probably one of the reasons Einstein wanted his theory to be known as “invariance” theory rather than “relativity” theory. Another reason was the invariance of light speed \(c\) regardless of frame). So let’s calculate the interval from your reference frame. When you see me, you see me flashing by because of the high relative speed between us. I may look calm while smoking my cigar but you note my speed relative to your frame as \(0.5c\). I will write this speed simply as 0.5 because \(c = 1\) using our new distance unit the light-second. According to special relativity, because of my high relative speed you will observe that my clock is running slow and so you will find that what I have called 1 second is from your viewpoint more than 1 second, that is, if your time is \(t\) then \(t' > t = 1\). The relation of \(t'\) to \(t\) is given by the Lorentz transformation law and I will use this law without offering an explanation for it in order to avoid unnecessary digression. The Lorentz transformation is given by:

6. \[ t' = \frac{t}{\sqrt{1-u^2}} \] 

\((u\) is the relative speed between us)

We know that \(t = 1\) and \(u = 0.5\). So we can use 6 to arrive at a value for \(t'\). We get \(t' = 1.1547\) seconds and this is the amount of time that elapses in your frame for every 1 second of time that you observe elapsing in my frame. Now let’s turn our attention to the distance I have travelled relative to you. You will say that I have travelled for more than 1 second (precisely for \(t' = 1.1547\) seconds) and so at a relative speed of 0.5 we can arrive at the distance I have travelled relative to you by using the equation distance = speed x time. You will say that I have travelled 0.5 light-seconds per second multiplied by 1.1547 seconds and this is 0.57735 light-
seconds. We can now see your calculation of the interval for the same event. It is $t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2)$, in other words, it is the time squared minus the distance squared or $1.1547^2 - 0.57735^2 = 1.333 - 0.333 = 1$. As I had also measured an interval of 1 in my frame, this verifies Eq. 5 that says that the interval you and I measure for the same event will be the same. The interval in 4D space-time is analogous to distance in 3D ordinary space. Both quantities have more of a ‘reality’ to them than other quantities because they remain the same regardless of frame of reference. Distance and interval don’t change when looked at from different perspectives.

We can now see why a photon never ages. If your fancy new spaceship can do speeds much higher than 0.5 and much closer to 1 (light speed) then Eq. 6 for time transformation gives us amazing results. If your spaceship does $u = 0.9$ then 6 gives us $t' = 2.294$ seconds for each $t = 1$.

In other words, at a relative speed of 0.9, your clock measures 2.294 seconds for each second on my clock. If your spaceship does $u = 0.99$ then $t' = 7.089$ seconds for each $t = 1$. The closer the relative speed $u$ is to $c = 1$, the slower my time passes when seen from your frame. If, per impossible, your spaceship approaches light speed so that $u = c = 1$, then $t'$ will approach infinity (this is clear from the denominator in 6). This means that from your frame, it will take an infinite number of seconds for 1 second to elapse in my frame. In other words, from your frame, time will have come to a standstill in my frame. This scenario is impossible for a spaceship and a space station. However, if we replace your spaceship with a photon we can actually make sense of it. For an imaginary micro man in a photon travelling at light speed, my time in the space station should be at a standstill. This means that from his frame no time dependent processes can take place in my frame. I can neither light my cigar nor inhale the smoke nor yet even breathe because time is at a standstill. On the flip side, from my frame it is photon man who is travelling at speed $c = 1$ and so 6 flips the result so that it will take an infinite number of my seconds for even 1 second to elapse on his clock and so it is his time that has slowed down to a complete standstill. Thus, from my perspective photon man can never age. Time has come to such a halt that he cannot even breathe, let alone light a cigar and inhale the smoke. This is why there is no such thing as photon man. There is only the photon that never ages and never decays in any way. A photon is the same age as it was at the Big Bang. Light does not get old, not even by one second.

We have our result but I will mention a couple of other things that will be useful later on. Light does not age or decay. But on the way to arriving at that result you might have noticed something strange. The imaginary micro man in the photon thinks that my time has come to a complete standstill so much so that I cannot even purchase the time to take a breath. Can photon man’s view be right in some sense, in any sense? There is a tendency in modern physics to push for symmetry of viewpoints and to accept each viewpoint as correct in its own right. But surely this symmetry breaks down in the present case because there is something plainly wrong in photon man’s viewpoint. Photon man has arrived at the extreme conclusion that I cannot even breathe. But there is a fact of the matter here and that is that I do indeed breathe and light cigars and inhale smoke. Given that fact, we cannot treat photon man’s view of things as correct. On the flip side, my view of things is perfectly okay because I am at liberty to arrive at the conclusion that time is at a standstill for photons, and no one is any worse off because there is no one living inside a photon, photon man is a fiction. Photons are particles that lack consciousness and don’t decay while I am a person who has consciousness and does age with time. This is an eminently reasonable suggestion. It is a suggestion that has implications for the nature of time. Later, I will re-introduce a Newtonian view of time as
absolute and not relative. There is an absolute fact of the matter regarding whose time has slowed down. This idea is not alien to Einstein’s special theory of relativity and is known in the literature as the twin paradox (paradoxical because of its absoluteness and its lack of relativity). It also has experimental confirmation using mu-mesons.7 If my twin brother accelerates away from my space station and reaches an incredible speed then it is his time that will slow down. From my perspective he will light cigars and inhale smoke in slow motion (his time slowing down does not mean that he now has time for more activities but rather that each activity is done at a slower pace, in other words, all his time-dependent processes including aging have slowed down). If he makes a u-turn and returns to my space station then we will both have smoked the same number of cigars (assuming similar smoking habits say 3 cigars every 24 hours) but I will have aged more than him because his aging had slowed down when he was on the move.

The other thing that will be useful to note is that the event of light travelling from one point to another always has a zero interval regardless of reference frame. This can easily be verified from 5. If 1 second passes in my reference frame then in that time light will have travelled a distance of 1 light-second. As time squared = 1² and distance squared = 1² we get \( t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) = 1^2 - 1^2 = 0 \), that is, the interval is 0. If we measure the interval of this event from your reference frame travelling at 0.5 relative to me then \( t' = 1.1547 \) seconds (from 6). Obviously in this much time light will travel the proportionally longer distance of 1.1547 light-seconds. Thus, \( t'^2 = 1.1547^2 \) and \( (x'^2 + y'^2 + z'^2) = 1.1547^2 \). So the interval measured from your frame is \( t'^2 - (x'^2 + y'^2 + z'^2) = 1.1547^2 - 1.1547^2 = 0 \). This confirms that where light goes from a given point is always separated from it by a zero interval. For light, it is always the case that \( t^2 = (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) \) and so \( t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) = 0 \). The invariance of the light interval as 0 is also direct proof that light travels at speed \( c = 1 \) regardless of reference frame. For some events the interval squared is a positive number, for example, when I sat on my bench for 1 second the interval was +1. Such events occur all the time in a universe governed by special relativity. For other events the interval squared is a negative number. Such events can never occur in a universe governed by special relativity. For example, the event of light travelling from the Sun to the Earth in 1 second (the Sun-Earth distance is nearly 500 light-seconds) and so 1 second is hopelessly insufficient time) has a negative interval squared because the distance that has to be covered is too great in the very short time that is given, in other words, \( t^2 < (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) \) and so \( t^2 - (x^2 + y^2 + z^2) < 0 \). Events that have a negative interval squared cannot occur in a universe governed by special relativity because nothing travels faster than light and so in 1 second nothing can travel a distance greater than 1 light second (and thereby give us a negative interval squared). Nothing can have an interval squared less than that of light which is 0. The light interval squared of 0 is an absolute physical limit according to special relativity. If something could travel faster than light (as the superluminal but unconfirmed tachyon is said to) then it would cover more than 1 light-second in 1 second and would thus have a negative interval squared. Special relativity cannot accommodate this. However, as John Bell showed in 1964, and as was subsequently confirmed by experiment in the 1970s and 80s, when two photons are quantum mechanically entangled they mysteriously communicate their status to each other instantaneously over vast distances (what Einstein called spooky action at a distance). In other words, it takes no time at all for one photon to ‘communicate’ its status to its entangled partner even if the twain were at opposite ends of the universe. If we count this as an event then it most certainly has a negative interval squared. This means that special relativity hangs
on by the skin of its teeth depending on how we interpret this ‘event’. Later, these observations will be useful when discussing the relation of God to space.

Figure 2 shows a 2-dimensional depiction of the standard time cone where all the points that are at 45 degrees to the axes (solid cone lines) are at a zero interval from the origin. This is because the slope of a 45 degree line is 1 and this is light speed, in other words, all points on the solid line have the same value of time as of distance and thus all such points are at a zero interval (light interval) from O. For \( t < 0 \) (the shaded area), travelling at light speed on these 45 degree lines one can arrive at the event O. Any point in region 2 can arrive at O even if it is moving at less than light speed. You could plot me on this graph at \( t = -1 \) and \( x = 0 \) while I am sitting on my bench. After 1 second I arrive at \( t = 0 \) and \( x = 0 \), this being point O. I have not moved in space but I have in time. For \( t < 0 \) (shaded area), no point in region 1 can arrive at event O because of too much distance to cover in too little time unless it travels faster than light which is not possible according to special relativity. Any point in region 3 is part of the future that can be affected by event O because it is within the solid upright cone and so has a positive interval squared measured from O. In other words, from O, I could travel at less than light speed to any point in region 3. Of course, only light could travel from O to any point on the 45 degree solid lines (of the upright cone) as all such points are at a zero interval from O. Finally, for \( t > 0 \) (unshaded area), O cannot affect any point in region 1. If I send a light beam to the Andromeda galaxy (event O) then it cannot reach an alien living there until 4 years later (light takes 4 years to get to Andromeda). For all time periods shorter than 4 years, the event of the alien receiving our light signal is in region 1 on the diagram. If the time period is 4 years then the event is on the solid cone line (of the upright cone). If the time period is longer than that then the event is in region 3, that is, it is part of our affective future just as points in region 2 are part of our affective past.

**Figure 2**

![Figure 2](image)

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**A Computer without a Circuit Board**

That a photon never stops and never ages are truly amazing properties. Ancient or medieval theologians would have had a field day had they known of the existence of such a wondrous particle. Of course, as we saw, the photon cannot harbour life. However, this does not mean that lifeless photons cannot come together in some ingenious way to become the basis of a greater life. After all, carbon atoms do not (presumably) harbour life and yet they come
together in complex patterns to become the basis for life on Earth. And if life were photon-based rather than carbon-based then surely it would last forever. In fact, some religious traditions hold that the angels are made from light. Here, we will consider whether light can rise to the most sublime of all challenges. Can light be the basis for God’s eternal life?

In the Section 3 (‘Pure Light Gates’), we will see whether photons can interact with each other in order to perform at least binary computations. For now we will consider another problem that is even more basic. Recall that we must build God purely out of light without using any other ingredients. This was described earlier as akin to demanding that the carpenter build a house purely out of wood without using steel nails, glue etcetera. The computers in common use nowadays use electrons to perform their computations. But of course they don’t use only electrons because other materials are needed to create the necessary electron flows. Electrons ‘do their thing’ in a complex circuitry built out of a range of other materials. If this were not so and if, as a result, electrons were flying off in all directions it would be very difficult to perform any computation at all. As in the case of electrons, we need other materials (such as optical fibres in place of wires) if we want to build a circuit board for photons so that they can interact with each other in a well-behaved manner rather than simply fly off in all directions. In fact, the prototype light computers in existence today actually use a range of materials to get light to perform the necessary computations. But our question is whether we can build a light computer using only light?

The answer lies in the photon itself and we may see this as a third fabulous property of the photon. Even though a photon has no mass, it still produces a gravitational field and thereby attracts other photons. Because of this mutual attraction there is no reason to believe that photons, when on their own, will fly off in all directions. In his general theory of relativity, Einstein set down his views on gravity and showed that it is not only mass that gravitates, but also energy and pressure. For example, a 1 kg iron weight measure will actually register a (very slightly) higher weight than 1 kg if its temperature is hot. This is because when the weight measure is hotter it has more energy, and energy gravitates and contributes to weight. Similarly, a wound up spring has a (very slightly) higher weight than a loose spring because pressure gravitates and thus contributes to weight. Steve Carlip, Professor of Physics at the University of California, Davis, responds on the internet to the question of photon gravitation:

**Question:** Basically the question is do photons have gravity?

**Answer:** Yes. It’s a bit complicated, though: the source of gravity is not just mass, but the stress-energy tensor, which depends on mass, energy, momentum, pressure, and internal stresses. Photons don’t have rest mass, but they do have energy and momentum, and energy and momentum gravitate.

**Question:** Has this been experimentally investigated?

**Answer:** Not for free photons – the effect is far too small. But it has been tested, to very good accuracy, that the electrostatic energy of an atomic nucleus contributes to its gravitational mass.

The fact that electrostatic energy (which is in any case photons or gluons because they are tiny quanta of energy) has gravitational mass seems confirmation enough that photons gravitate.
In fact, it has long been known that light beams that are not travelling parallel to each other in the same direction have a gravitational effect on each other. This result was first published in an article by the title *On the Gravitational Field Produced by Light*, Richard C. Tolman, Paul Ehrenfest and Boris Podolsky, *Phys. Rev*, 37, March 1931. Some of the abstract reads as follows:

... Test rays moving parallel to the pencil or pulse [of light] do so with uniform unit velocity the same as that in the pencil or pulse itself. Test rays moving in other directions experience a gravitational action [from the pencil or pulse of light].

All of this means that we can legitimately imagine photons whizzing around in circular orbits even if there were no other material in the universe. In other words, it is possible to imagine a complex organization of photons (for example, a complex “knitting ball” of light) with each photon repeatedly interacting with others. So we don’t need a motherboard (circuit board of a microcomputer) because the photons can gravitate in ingenious ways to design their own motherboard.

In 1955, John Wheeler investigated electromagnetic or gravitational waves that are held together in a confined region by the gravitational attraction of their own field energy. He coined the term *geon* as a contraction of "gravitational electromagnetic entity." Recently some objects very similar to the Wheeler idea of *geon* were discovered in Loop Quantum Gravity.

2. Digital and Quantum Gates

In the last subsection, we saw that it is possible for there to be a light computer that has no circuit board (made from non-light materials), even though circuit boards are an indispensable part of common computers because they control and limit electron flows. I suggested that photon gravitation can be the basis for complex controls and limits on the flow of photons. While a light computer may not need ordinary computer items such as circuit board or casing, a critical question still needs to be answered. Can light perform computations without any other material in its circuitry? In order to answer this question, we will look more closely at the circuitry of theoretical light computers and then see if we can strip away all non-light materials and still get the circuit design to work.

In digital computers, very basic operations are performed by logic gates. In the context of light computers, we will call these quantum (logic) gates. Digital logic gates use the binary numerals 1 and 0. These numerals are called binary *bits* and can only have the value of either 1 or 0. Because of this simplicity, any physical system that can switch between two saturated states can represent a binary bit. In the first saturated state its value will be 1 and when it switches to the second saturated state its value will be 0. In digital computers, the physical system is a wire that may have a current (more accurately, voltage) or may not. If it has current then it stands for the mathematical (binary) value of 1. If no current then it stands for 0. The binary numerals 1 and 0 are the basis of all computations that are performed. Let me say a word on binary numerals. Remember that the mathematics remains unchanged regardless of the numeration system (binary, decimal, etc.) you choose to use. Computers use binary numeration but this makes no difference to the underlying mathematical reality being represented by the numerals.
just as physical reality does not change if we talk in English rather than Urdu. A house is a house even if there are different words to refer to it in the different languages. And one plus one is two regardless of whether this is written in binary or decimal form.

We can now see how computers perform some basic logical operations. We will just look at the NOT, AND, and OR gates and observe that other more sophisticated gates can be built out of these ones. The NOT gate refers to a circuit that always changes (inverts) the value of its input. If the input is 1 (in other words, if the input wire has current) then the output is 0 (output wire has no current). If the input is 0 then the output is 1. We will not use space here to show the electronic circuit that makes such an operation possible, but such a circuit has a simple enough design. Figure 3 shows a standard symbolic depiction of the NOT gate and a standard table (called a truth table) that gives an exhaustive list of the input/output values for this gate.

Figure 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An AND gate usually has 2 inputs (though it can have more). It gives an output of 1 if and only if both its inputs are 1. In all other cases, it gives an output of 0. In other words, it is only when Input A and Input B are 1 that it gives the output 1 (this is why it is called AND) as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input A</th>
<th>Input B</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

An AND gate followed by a NOT gate gives us a NAND gate (this being a verbal contraction of NOT and AND). Basically, the NOT gate inverts all the output values in the truth table of the AND gate as shown in Figure 5.
The OR gate has at least 2 inputs. If either or both inputs are 1 then it gives an output of 1 otherwise the output is 0 as shown in Figure 6.

An OR gate followed by a NOT gate gives us a NOR gate (verbal contraction of NOT and OR). The NOT gate inverts all the output values in the truth table of an OR gate so that if neither input A nor input B is 1 then the NOR gate gives an output of 1. These and other basic gates can combine in complex ways to perform some very difficult computations. The question we are interested in asking is whether light instead of electricity can perform similar computations. So we need to turn our attention to quantum (logic) gates.

Quantum gates are very different from digital gates. However, most of the differences do not matter for the case that I am making here and so I will not include a discussion on superposition, interaction, communication, and measurement. What does matter is that the physical basis for quantum gates is the newly discovered and very bizarre properties of quantum particles. It is this physical basis or physical resource that I will focus on as the difference between digital and quantum gates. While digital gates use electric currents that are familiar and well understood in classical physics, the techniques used to operate quantum gates are quantum entanglement and quantum erasure, both concepts being the furthest
thing from classical physics. My discussion will focus only on quantum entanglement. When we have considered this strange phenomenon, we will use it to construct NOT, AND, and OR quantum gates. Finally, we will try to strip these gates of any material other than light and see if they can still work. That’s the plan. If it is possible to construct quantum gates with nothing but light then it is possible for there to be a supercomputer made up of nothing but light.

Quantum Entanglement
The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle states that we cannot know both the position and velocity of a quantum particle. We learn its position by bombarding it with something but in so doing we change its velocity and have forever lost our chance of knowing its initial velocity at that position. Similarly, if we learn its velocity then we forever lose our chance of knowing the position that it had. We cannot know both position and velocity. On the face of it, this is an epistemic limit. Every particle must have a definite position and velocity (that is reality) even though we cannot know both at the same time. That we cannot know both does not mean that the values for position and velocity don’t actually exist in a given moment in time. This is a classical physics view of the Uncertainty Principle. In 1935, Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen (EPR), set out to argue in a clever way that this classical interpretation is right. They set out to show that every particle has a definite position and velocity even if we are unable to know both at the same time.

EPR offered a thought experiment. A single particle disintegrating into two identical particles that fly off in opposite directions with the same speed is a common happening in sub-atomic particle physics. As the particles are flying off in precisely opposite directions with equal speeds, their distance from their source of origin will be the same. Now let’s assume something thoroughly reasonable. Let’s assume that if one particle is disturbed then nothing will happen to the other particle. After all, there is no reason to believe that they are connected in any way and all that they seem to have in common is their source of origin. Twin brothers also have source of origin in common, but if one gets a fever nothing happens to the other especially since they left home for different destinations a long time ago. So our assumption is very reasonable indeed. This very reasonable assumption can be expressed by saying that the universe is local. What this means is that if something is next to you (that is, it is in your local space) then it can have an effect on you otherwise it cannot. An event in the Andromeda cannot affect me instantaneously here on Earth because even at the fastest possible speed (that of light) it takes 4 years to get from Andromeda to Earth. As the universe is local (by our assumption), anything we do to the particle flying to the right will not affect the particle flying to the left and vice versa. Each particle seems to be quite independent of the other.

Here is the ingenuity of EPR. If we learn the position of the particle flying to the right by bombarding it, then we will also have learned the position of the particle flying to the left (as their paths are identical in opposite directions). In other words, we will have learned something about the particle flying to the left without disturbing it in the least. EPR argued that we could just as well have learned the velocity of the right moving particle instead of its position. By doing so we would have learned the velocity (rather than the position) of the left moving particle. Basically, we could choose to have either position or velocity information on
the left particle without disturbing it (and by disturbing only the right particle). Because we could have either piece of information this means that both pieces of information actually exist. This was their conclusion. To repeat, we could have had the position information or we could have had the velocity information. We could have had either and so both pieces of information actually exist. In other words, the position and velocity of a particle have a reality regardless of our ability to discover it. EPR were in this way engaging in much needed philosophy of physics, as the issue was of a reality that could never be known. Their point was that a particle has a definite position and velocity even though we cannot discover both at the same time. The last sentence shows that EPR is consistent with the Uncertainty Principle because it only claims that every particle has a definite position and velocity, and does not claim that we can know both values. Though I am a lay reader, I feel that EPR does pose something of a challenge to the Uncertainty Principle because it certainly appears that we could also know both position and velocity for the left particle. If we bombard the right particle to get position information and simultaneously bombard the left particle to get velocity information then we will have both pieces of information for a given point in time. Of course, we will have thereby disturbed the left particle, but even this may not be necessary. If a disintegrating particle splintered into four identical particles flying off in symmetrical directions (NSWE), then we could gather 3 pieces of information on, say, the West moving particle. We could gather these 3 pieces of information by disturbing the other 3 particles and using the symmetry of the situation to calculate 3 facts about the West particle. In other words, we could know both its position and velocity (and one other thing) without disturbing it in the least.

It turns out that we don’t have to worry about any of this because the universe is not local! In other words, an event in the Andromeda can have an instantaneous effect on me! The Uncertainty Principle is king of the quantum world because if you so much as look at the right moving particle the left moving particle instantaneously ‘knows’ of this and is disturbed by it. For Einstein, this was a bizarre possibility for it would be ‘spooky action at a distance’. But, in 1964, Irish physicist, John Bell, discovered just that in what one commentator called “the most profound discovery of science”27. Let me explain.

Remember that (based on ordinary intuitions and classical physics) EPR claimed that particles have a definite position and velocity even if we can never know both at the same time. Bell showed that there is a way to experimentally confirm or reject the EPR claim. In other words, if particles really do have a definite position and velocity then this reality will have experimentally observable consequences. By showing that experimental confirmation is possible Bell took us to the threshold of discovering the truth about the quantum world. Is there an epistemic limit that stops us from learning both position and velocity at the same time? Or is it rather that the quantum realm is weirdly different from the classical, and that particles simply do not have a definite position and velocity in the first place? It is not epistemic limits but rather this strange quantum reality that makes it impossible to know both position and velocity because these values simply don’t exist (at the same time). Keep in mind that when we set up the critical experiment in the next paragraph you will see that it does not use position and velocity but rather spin properties. This will make no difference to our conclusion on the nature of the quantum realm. The fact is that just as we cannot know both position and velocity at the same time we also cannot know the spin about both the horizontal and vertical axis at the same time. We can only know the spin about one of the axes. Instead of
asking whether particles have a definite position and velocity we will ask whether they have a
definite spin along the horizontal and vertical axes even though we cannot know both spins.
Do the particles have a definite spin about each axis but because of an epistemic limit we
cannot know the spin about more than one axis? Or is it rather that they do not have a definite
spin about each axis and it is this strange un-classical reality that makes it impossible to know
the spin about more than one axis? The case is analogous to knowing either position or
velocity information but not both and then wondering whether this is because of an epistemic
limit or rather because of the nature of reality.

Bell’s insight may be understood in the context of an experiment very similar to the EPR
thought experiment. Only, in explaining this experiment we will specifically use photons
(although electrons would serve just as well) flying off in opposite directions and, as I
mentioned, we will be concerned with their spin properties rather than position and velocity.
Energetic calcium atoms placed exactly midway between (and in line with) two detectors emit
a pair of photons, each photon zipping at the same speed (light speed) in the direction of each
detector. Given their common origin, the pair of photons has perfectly correlated spin
properties. This is analogous to the right and left moving particles considered earlier that had
perfectly correlated position and velocity. That particle pair had the same distance from source
and equal speed in opposite directions, and although the photon pair we are now considering
also has these properties, our interest is in their perfect spin correlation. Our detectors are
designed to identify the spin of an incoming photon. The spin of the photon is either clockwise
(C) or anti-clockwise (A) about a given axis. Our detectors have limited capability and can
identify the spin only about 3 axes: vertical (V), horizontal (H), and back-and-forth (Z). For a
single incoming photon a detector randomly chooses an axis (V, H, or Z) about which to
measure spin and identifies the spin about that axis as C or A. Now let me state the critical fact
about perfect correlation again. What is observed in all such experiments is that because the
photon pairs emanating from the calcium atoms have perfectly correlated spin properties,
whenever the detectors choose the same axis for a photon pair they always get the same spin
reading. If the left detector chooses the V axis for the left moving photon and registers a C spin
(about that axis) then if the right detector also randomly happened to choose the V axis then it
will also get a C spin for the right photon. If the left and right detectors both randomly choose
the Z axis then both will register the same spin because each photon pair has perfectly
correlated spin. EPR explained this result by saying that the photon pairs are ‘programmed’ at
the source with the same definite spins about each axis. This is why the detectors always agree
whenever they happen to choose the same axis. This is the setup, now for Bell’s insight.

For a pair of photons, there are 9 possible axes combinations randomly chosen by the two
detectors. These 9 combinations can be written as follows with the first coordinate showing
the axis chosen by the left detector for the left photon and the second showing that chosen by
the right detector for the right photon: (V, V), (V, H), (V, Z), (H, V), (H, H), (H, Z), (Z, V), (Z, H), (Z,
Z). Now if EPR’s explanation is right then each photon has a definite spin about each axis. As
the pair of photons are perfectly correlated, for a given axis the left and right photon have the
same definite spin about that axis. Consider a photon pair where the left photon has C spin
about the V axis, A about H, and C about Z. Then the right photon has the same spin about
each respective axis. Bell’s ground breaking insight is that if EPR are right (and each photon
pair shares definite spins), then we have an experimental prediction as to how often the
detectors will give us the same spin reading, that is, how often the detectors will agree. If this
prediction turns out to be false, then EPR are wrong! Assuming EPR are right and the photon pairs share definite spins, the experimental prediction is as follows. Of the 9 random combinations, 5 of them will give us agreement. We can see this using as an example the photon pair mentioned earlier in this paragraph. For the combinations (V, V), (H, H), and (Z, Z) the detectors have (randomly) chosen the same axis and so will agree on the spin. Moreover, as the spin is C about both V and Z axes, the combinations (V, Z) and (Z, V) will also give us agreement between the detectors as they will both register C spin. Since 5 of the 9 combinations give us spin agreement between the detectors, we can say that if EPR are right then the detectors will agree for more than 50% of the photon pairs. If EPR are wrong then the detectors will agree only 50% or less of the time. We simply run the experiment many times (with many photon pairs) to see how often the detectors agree. In other words, definite spin properties have experimentally observable consequences. If, as EPR claim, there is a fact of the matter concerning spin about each axis then we will be able to confirm this fact by the experimental observation of more than 50% detector agreement.

Experimental confirmation during the 1970s and 80s yielded an earth shattering result. The detectors did not agree more than 50% of the time. In other words, EPR were wrong! The facts are, of course, unchanged. The photon pairs always give the same spin when measured about the same axis, but the explanation for this phenomenon that was offered by EPR is wrong. EPR claimed that the photons always give the same spin (that is, they have perfect spin correlation) because they originated from the same source (in our case, energized calcium atoms) and are thus ‘programmed’ with the same spins at the source. Each photon in the ‘programmed’ pair gives the same spin about the same axis because both photons are ‘programmed’ the same way. If the right photon gives C about Z then the left will also give C if it is measured about Z. Identical toys manufactured in the same factory may find their way to different homes and when they all behave in the same way and show a red light on pressing one button and a blue light on pressing another then there is no mystery. That’s just the way the toys were programmed at the source (that is, at the factory). The calcium atoms are the photon factory and if the photons give the same spin about the same axis then there is no mystery because they come from the same source. However, this explanation is precisely what the experimental observation rejects. We now know that the photon pairs are not ‘programmed’ in an identical way at the calcium atom ‘factory’ because if that EPR explanation were true then the detectors would agree more than 50% of the time. As the detectors do not agree this often, it is not the case that both right and left photon share a program that says C about V, A about H, and C about Z. So instead of identical toys manufactured at a factory we have something much weirder. We have an identical pair of die that are in use in casinos in different cities but always give the same number when they are rolled! The problem is that the fact of the case is unchanged. The photons always have the same spin if measured about the same axis (perfect spin correlation) but having rejected the EPR explanation there is no longer a good explanation for how or why this is so. If the photons were not ‘programmed’ at the source then how is it that they agree with each other each time they are measured about the same axis? Do they have a way of instantaneously communicating with each other so that when one photon gives a C spin about the Z axis then the other does the same if measured about the same axis?

If instantaneous communication between the photon pair is our only explanation then we are violating special relativity which says that no communication can travel faster than light speed.
Instantaneous communication means not speed $c$ but speed infinity. In the 1980’s experiment described above, the two detectors were placed 13 metres apart. In 1997, a new experiment confirmed the same results but this time the detectors were 11 kilometres apart! When the right photon gives C about Z then the left instantaneously does the same even though it is 11 kilometres away! The number of times there is detector agreement (when randomly choosing axes) is not more than 50% meaning that this perfect correlation is not the result of ‘programming’ at the source. This suggests instantaneous communication between the photon pair. Physicists agree that there is no reason to believe that the same won’t happen even if the photons were 11 light years apart or, for that matter, 11 billion light years. Bell’s insight and the subsequent experimental confirmation of this quantum entanglement certainly put special relativity on the defensive. Some physicists believe that the claims of the theory need to be qualified in order to accommodate the Bell result. The core of special relativity may not be the claim that light sets a speed limit but rather the claim that the velocity of light is the same regardless of frame of reference.

Some Quantum Gates
We are now ready to build some quantum logic gates such as the NOT, AND, and OR gates. Our task should be easy because the only new phenomenon we will make use of is quantum entanglement without getting into details of superposition (probabilities and phases), interaction, and measurement. However, I need to introduce one critical piece of apparatus, the polarized beam splitter. In order to do this, first let me say a few words on polarization. Stand on one side of a wooden picket fence. Tell your friend to stand on the other side. Make sure that you are standing at a considerable distance from the fence so that the two of you can hold on to the ends of a long taught rope. The rope must pass between two pickets in the fence. When the two of you are holding the rope taught and you start vibrating the rope left and right, a wave will pass through the rope in the horizontal plane. However, the wave will not reach your friend (at least not in any good shape) because the vertical pickets will block the horizontal wave. On the other hand, if you vibrate the rope up and down in a vertical plane then the wave will pass through the vertical pickets (in good shape) to your friend. We can say that the picket fence allows vertically polarized waves to pass through but blocks horizontally polarized ones. The same thing happens with light and glass. The light is analogous to the waves in a rope and the glass is analogous to the picket fence. Horizontally polarized light will not pass through a vertically polarized glass. This is the theory behind polarized sunglasses that block the light from shiny surfaces. On sunny days, light shines on flat surfaces (such as a desert highway or lake) and becomes horizontally polarized. The glare from these surfaces could distract you while driving. However, if you are wearing polarized sunglasses that block horizontally polarized light then you will not experience the glare.19

A polarized beam splitter operates on the same principle. We can think of it as a polarized piece of glass placed at a 45 degree angle. If it is ‘oriented in the HV basis’20 then it will transmit horizontally polarized photons and reflect vertically polarized photons. Figure 7 illustrates this.
As shown in the figure, the vertically polarized photon (V-photon) is reflected by the beam splitter while the horizontally polarized photon (H-photon) is transmitted. The reason it is called a beam splitter is that it splits incoming light into two beams, one that is reflected and the other that is transmitted as shown in the last drawing of Figure 7.

Now let’s design the NOT gate. Look at Figure 8.

For the NOT gate to give an output one condition must be satisfied. This condition is that both detectors D1 and D2 must receive one and only one (1AO1) photon. This can only happen if the two photons arriving at the beam splitter (HV Basis) have the same polarization. In other words, the input photon has to have the same polarization as the photon travelling from source S (shown as a circle) to the beam splitter. We can easily see why this is so. If the input is a V-photon then it will be reflected to D1. In such a case, the only way for D2 to receive a photon (and for the NOT gate to give an output given our strict condition) is if the photon coming from S is also a V-photon so that will be reflected to D2. On the flip side, if the input is an H-photon then it will go straight through to D2 and now the only way for D1 to receive a photon (and for the NOT gate to operate) will be if the photon from S is also an H-photon that goes straight through to D1. Thus, for all practical purposes the photon from S to beam splitter is perfectly correlated with (has the same polarization as) the input photon. This is because when they are not correlated the NOT gate does not give an output. Now the photon pairs emitted by the source S are entangled in such a way as to be anti-correlated. If the photon travelling towards the beam splitter is an H-photon then the one travelling towards the output will be a V-photon and vice versa. This is just how the photon pairs emitted by S are quantum mechanically entangled. If you followed all of that then you already know that we have a NOT
gate. If the input is a V-photon then the photon travelling from S to the beam splitter is also a V-photon. However, because the photon going to the output is anti-correlated to the photon going to the beam splitter (from S), the photon going to the output has to be an H-photon. Thus we have inversion. The input is a V-photon while the output is an H-photon. You can easily see that if the input were an H-photon the output would be a V-photon. We can call these photons quantum bits or qubits (analogous to digital bits). We can even use the binary values of 1 and 0. We can say that the H-photon represents 0 while the V-photon represents 1. In this way, we can get the truth table of the quantum NOT gate to look like that of the digital NOT gate. When you input the photonic qubit 1 the gate gives an output qubit of 0 and vice versa.

Now let’s look at the AND gate in Figure 9.

Figure 9

**AND Gate**

Remember that the AND gate has at least 2 inputs (INPUT A and B). Our old condition continues to apply. The gate will not give an output unless all detectors (D1, D2, D3, and D4) receive 1AO1 (one and only one) photon. The only way D1 and D2 can get a photon each is if the photon in input A has the same polarization as that of photon a coming from S. The only way D3 and D4 can get a photon each is that if the input B photon has the same polarization as that of photon b coming from S. Thus, for example, if input A and B are 0 and 1 respectively (H and V respectively), then photons a and b have to be 0 and 1 also (in that order) in order for the gate to give an output. In this way, photons a and b accurately represent the values of the two inputs. Now in this gate, source S is emitting 3 photons a, b, and c that have to be correlated the following way for the gate to operate as an AND gate. Only if a and b are both 1 should the output c be 1. In all other cases, the output should be 0. In order to attain these
correlations, the photons emitted by S must be entangled in precisely that way. Thus, the photons \((a,b,c)\) are entangled as follows: \((0,0,0)\), \((0,1,0)\), \((1,0,0)\) and \((1,1,1)\). In other words, these are the values each photon takes on given the values of the other two photons in the triplet. That's just the way they are entangled. We are done. To repeat, when the inputs A and B are both 1 then the AND gate will give an output only if the photons \(a\) and \(b\) have the values 1 and 1 respectively. But when \(a\) and \(b\) have these values then \(c\) also has the value 1 given the entanglement pattern \((1,1,1)\). The truth table for this gate is the same as that of a digital AND gate.

Moreover, we don’t have to draw a separate figure for the OR gate. The same figure (Figure 9) will do only making the following change. The photons \(a\), \(b\), and \(c\) must be entangled in a different way. If \(a\) and \(b\) (these two photons represent the inputs A and B) have values of 0 and 0 then \(c\) must also have a value of 0. For all other combinations of \(a\) and \(b\), \(c\) must have a value of 1. Thus the 3 photons from S must be entangled as follows: \((0,0,0)\), \((0,1,1)\), \((1,0,1)\) and \((1,1,1)\). Of course, this is precisely the truth table of the digital OR gate.

3. Pure Light Gates

Our final challenge is to remove all non-light materials that were used in the construction of our quantum gates. Understandably, the vast majority of physicists are not interested in constructing quantum gates purely out of light and so have not given the matter much thought. Why would they be interested in pulling off a stunt like that when it is hard enough to make light computers work even using the entire range of available materials? Our interests, however, are theological. In pursuit of them, we need to remove the source S, the detectors, and the beam splitters from our quantum gates because all of these are made from materials other than light. It turns out that it is philosophically and theoretically possible to achieve this task!

The easiest piece of apparatus to remove is the source S. I have already made the case that divine thought is the source of all energy. As a photon is a quanta of energy, its source is divine thought. Divine thought can produce entangled pairs, triplets, and so on, of photons. Thus, the source S can simply be replaced by divine thought that is able to produce entangled quanta of energy. As a concrete example, divine thought can be said to produce entangled photons for an OR gate on the following pattern: \((0,0,0)\), \((0,1,1)\), \((1,0,1)\) and \((1,1,1)\).

It may also not be much of a challenge to remove the detectors \((D_1, D_2, D_3,\text{ and } D_4)\). This is because quantum gates such as the OR gate are not only the basis for God’s thought but also depend on His thought. This self-reflexive property is common place when considering a self-sufficient being such as God. There would be no divine thought without quantum gates and there would be no quantum gates without divine thought. We can thus deploy divine thought and divine knowledge in the construction of divine quantum gates. In divine quantum gates, God’s thought and knowledge is self-reflexively the basis for itself. More concretely, divine knowledge is one basis for the OR gate while the OR gate is a basis for divine knowledge. Divine knowledge can replace the photon detectors as God would know whether or not the photons \(a\) and \(b\) (emitted by S or, in our latest prototype, by divine thought) have the same value as the inputs A and B respectively. Only if they have the same value will the OR gate give an output. Thus, the detectors are replaced by divine knowledge.
The only apparatus left to be removed are the beam splitters. Our disadvantage here is that the vast majority of theoretical physicists do not at the present time seem particularly interested in knowing whether photons can interact and be channeled this way and that even without devices such as beam splitters. However, I have managed to unearth precise comments on this issue by Phil Marsden, a physicist at the Department of Microelectronics and Information Technology (IMIT), Laboratory of Optics, Photonics and Quantum Electronics (OPQ), Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) Stockholm. According to him, photons interactions are very difficult to observe because of their rapidity and very short duration. This is why it is useful to have devices such as beam splitters that give a precise location for photon-photon interactions. Marsden observes photons that have a phase difference between them as they arrive at a beam splitter. If the photons are in phase with each other (that is, 0° out of phase) or 180° out of phase, then each detector gets 1AO1 photon. If the photons are 90° or 270° out of phase then both photons arrive at the same detector (and the other detector gets no photon). The critical comment that Marsden makes and that I want to draw your attention to is the following:

Coming back to the medium problem, we can make the beam splitter as thin as we like and still have the effect. We are limited to one atomic layer in this case, but we could definitely think up different experiments where the interaction was not at the beam splitter, but separated a long distance away in space. The theory that we use to describe this effect certainly has no requirement for a beam splitter - it is just a convenient tool for bringing the two beams together. (Emphasis added)

Remember that Marsden is not working with a polarized beam splitter where the polarized glass is letting the H-photons through and reflecting the V-photons. Marsden’s beam splitter is a much simpler device (and may be as thin as only one atomic layer) that simply stands in the way of the photons giving them an opportunity to interact. Critically, Marsden observes that these photon interactions could, in theory, be occurring all the time and that the photons have no need for a beam splitter in order to interact. We are the ones who need the beam splitter in order to localize and observe the photon interactions. Marsden discovers that the incoming photons do indeed interact and that the phase difference between them determines their subsequent behavior. He begins by looking at the interactions between a photon pair arriving at the beam splitter. As already mentioned, if the photons are 0° or 180° out of phase then each detector gets a photon, while if they are 90° or 270° out of phase then both photons arrive at one of the detectors and the other detector gets none. A very interesting thing happened when Marsden observed two photon pairs arriving at the beam splitter. The frequency of the interaction was doubled. When the photons were 0°, 90°, 180°, or 270° out of phase each detector would get photons. When the photons were 45°, 135°, 225° or 315° out of phase only one detector would get photons. Marsden:

Now you can see that when we have two pairs of photons this interference has twice the frequency as for a single pair. If we now try it for three pairs the frequency is tripled and so on. This is no longer interference, but direct proof that photons do indeed interact and the interaction is dependent on the number of photons in the system, something that is not seen for any other type of wave.

The conclusion that I draw from Marsden’s work is that photon interactions on the basis of phase differences require only the simplest kind of beam splitter, an atomic thin layer of glass
at 45° that partially reflects and partially transmits light. Moreover, as Marsden explains, theoretically there is not even a need for this beam splitter for photon interactions based on phase differences to occur. The remaining problem to be solved is to construct our quantum gates using phase differences between photons rather than differences of polarization (horizontal or vertical). This is because gates based on the polarization phenomenon require the more sophisticated beam splitters in the form of polarized glass.

It turns out that it is no problem to build gates using phase differences. First, simply set one photon as the benchmark, let’s call it photon B. All the other photons in the quantum gate will be out of phase with the benchmark photon in varying degrees. If a photon is 0° or 180° out of phase with photon B then it has the value 0. If a photon is 90° or 270° out of phase with B then it has the value 1. Let’s use the NOT gate in Figure 8 as an example. When the input photon has a value of 0 then the output photon must have a value of 1 and vice versa. This is easy enough to achieve. According to Marsden’s work on phase differences outlined above, the only scenario in which both detectors get a photon is if the photons arriving at the beam splitter have the same value. If the input photon has a value of 0 this means that it is 0° or 180° out of phase with photon B. The gate will only give an output if the photon from S (travelling to the beam splitter) also has a value of 0, that is, if it is also 0° or 180° out of phase with photon B. The entangled partner of this last photon is going from S to the output and has to have a value of 1 (that is, has to be 90° or 270° out of phase with photon B) because the NOT gate has to invert the input value of 0. The entanglement pattern for the photon pair from S is (0, 1) and (1, 0) which is the truth table of a NOT gate. Our work is done. The same thing can be repeated for the other gates. Using phase differences instead of differences in polarization has allowed us to take advantage of Marsden’s observation that photons interact with each other on the basis of phase differences and that it is theoretically possible for such interactions to occur even without the beam splitter.

Having claimed, in Appendix 3: Section 2 (subsection: Free Will and Consciousness), that energy is the causal basis for divine will and consciousness, in this appendix we set out to see whether a physical construction of God is possible on the basis of the smallest indivisible unit of energy. We attempted this construction using the photon as our basic building block. Our task was to build God purely out of light without using any other ingredients. This was described earlier as akin to demanding that a carpenter build a house purely out of wood without using steel nails, glue etcetera. Proto type light computers in existence today actually use a range of materials (for example, optical fibers in place of wires) to get light to perform the necessary computations. But our question is whether there can be a light computer that uses only light and no other material? Our answer in this section is that it is theoretically and philosophically possible for there to be such a computer. I believe that this makes the possibility of God’s existence all the more real and goes a long way in support of theism.

1 The particle of the fourth physical force (weak force) is the weak gauge boson but it is a massive particle.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 10


http://www.physicsforums.com/showthread.php?t=174805


Wheeler speculated that microscopic *geons* may play the role of elementary particles. The Loop Quantum Gravity discovery is probably related to this speculation.

For a professional though accessible discussion of quantum entanglement see Greene, *Fabric*, pp. 99-123.

The 5 combinations out of 9 is true for the photon pair mentioned in the text (that had the spins C about V, A about H, C about Z) and for all other perfectly correlated photon pairs (try this with other pairs) except for those pairs that have the same spin about all 3 axes (for example, C about V, C about H, C about Z). However, for the latter kind of photon pair the agreement will be 9 combinations out of 9 because no matter what axis combination is randomly chosen the spin will always agree. Thus, the prediction that if EPR are right the detectors should agree more the 50% of the time is further strengthened.

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