The Stories of Joseph and the Cave: Reading Modern Qur'anic Commentaries in the United States

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Abstract

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The publication of Qur'an commentaries authored by contemporary Muslims provide glimpses into influential trends that have been competing for the attention of contemporary Muslims. This dissertation primarily examines three works of Qur'anic translation and exegesis (Ar. *Tafsīr*) in the English language. These works are representative of three influential trends or schools of thought in contemporary Islam: an "Islamist" or "Activist" trend represented by Abu'l 'Ala Mawdudi, a rationalist-modernist trend represented by Muhammad Asad, and a Salafi trend represented by the Mubarakpūrī English abridgement of the medievalist Ibn Kathīr's hadith-based tafsir. These commentators often engage earlier Qur'anic commentaries and make choices about which voices and positions from the "classical legacy" they foreground, highlighting what they believe may resonate with their readers.

The first chapter provides an historical overview to some of the major trends in Qur'anic exegesis. The second chapter provides background on the commentators, including the social and political contexts of the commentators as well as their education and important aspects of their careers. The third and fourth chapters focus on two chapters of the Qur'an (Q12 and Q18) as these appear in the three commentaries, highlighting how modern commentators reflect their own concerns and context and their various reform projects in their interpretations of Muslim scripture. I supplement the main three commentators with a sample of contemporary living voices who also comment on these two Qur'anic chapters to highlight how Muslims continue to reinterpret the

Qur'anic texts in relation to what they see as most relevant and meaningful. Chapter five looks at how these works have been received and considers how they offer a window into the contestation taking place in contemporary Islam. After a brief conclusion to the dissertation, I have an afterword which features a reflection upon my own teaching of these two chapters in a university setting.

While the Islamic scholarly traditions and Qur'anic commentaries are a multilayered, polyvalent tradition, these traditions are often (unfortunately) truncated by many contemporary Muslims. I try to highlight certain areas where the contemporary commentaries are, on the one hand, generally narrower than the rich polyvalent traditions of the premodern exegetical tradition, but on the other hand, move in new directions as Muslims today relate their readings of scripture to contemporary concerns. This analysis of contemporary Qur'anic commentaries and their commentators moves beyond freezing Muslims into the fixed category of the "premodern." Though the three commentaries were chosen to be representative of three important trends in modern Islam, the dissertation is also careful to show that the boundaries between these approaches are often fluid, providing concrete examples of how contemporary Muslims are reinterpreting Muslim scripture, affirming and selecting from the premodern tradition, critical of certain aspects of that tradition, and also adding their own voices to make the Qur'anic text speak to their modern situations.

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Dedication

To the memory of Imam Sohaib Sultan (b. 1980), the Muslim Chaplain at Princeton University, who made his transition on Friday, April 17, 2021. I hope your kindness is never forgotten, but continuously inspires us to follow your footsteps in loving the beloved. Al-Fatiha.

Introduction

In 2002, at the age of fifteen, while a sophomore in high school in Lower Manhattan, I completed memorizing the Qur'an. My father was proud and praised this accomplishment. But he also emphasized to me that this was just the beginning of my journey in seeking knowledge relating to the Qur'an. He pointed to the task he saw laying ahead of me. "This is a great blessing that you have memorized the Qur'an. Now you have to seek to understand the meanings of what you have memorized." My dissertation examines how contemporary American Muslims engage with interpretations of the Qur'an. If they want to attempt some sort of interpretation of the Qur'anic text, how do they go about doing so? What resources do they have at their disposal, and what has shaped those resources?

Of course, one approach is to put aside the commentary tradition and only focus on the Qur'anic text in Arabic, an approach which appeals to many Muslims. Even then, one's understanding of the Arabic language can differ from person to person and depend on training. While many Muslims generally read the Arabic Qur'an at least devotionally, they often engage with the Qur'an in translations and commentaries, interpreting it through exegetical works that add a layer on top of both the Arabic Qur'an, as well as through translations of the Qur'an, which are themselves works of interpretation. Questions of language, accessibility, availability, dissemination, and familiarity influence which Qur'anic commentary a given Muslim will turn to for assistance in interpreting the scripture. Even without a full-fledged commentary, if one engages the Qur'an through a translation, choices of interpretation have already been made to render that translation. While Bruce Lawrence and Khaled Blankinship have done important studies that look

at various English translations of the Qur'an, including their histories and word choices,[1] my dissertation looks at three English works (one translated from Arabic, another from Urdu, and one originally written in English) of Qur'anic commentaries as influential sites to examine the contestation over the very meaning of Islam that is taking place today. [2]

It is important to note that the influences on American Muslims are often not based strictly on one school of thought. As Edward Curtis writes, "even as the majority of Muslim Americans identify with a shared history, sacred texts, and authoritative religious interpretations, Muslim Americans themselves often point out that diversity is built into the religious DNA of Islam."[3] Given the sheer diversity of groups that exist among the American Muslim communities, there is much overlap and cross-fertilization in the discourses that the average Muslim is exposed to. Nevertheless, for the purpose of analytical clarity, in this dissertation, I investigate three texts of commentaries on the Qur'an that can be viewed as three distinct traditions, schools of thought, or orientations within contemporary Islam. While many commentaries exist, these three Qur'anic commentaries are especially significant for myself and some American Muslims:

(1) the Indian-Pakistani Abu'l 'Ala Mawdudi's postcolonial Islamic state–building project explicated on the pages of *Tafheem al-Qur'an* (Towards understanding the Qur'an),

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1 See Khalid Blankinship, *The Inimitable Qur'ān: Some Problems in English Translations of the Qur'ān with Reference to Rhetorical Features* (Boston: Brill, 2019) and Bruce Lawrence, *The Koran in English* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

[2] I rely on an English translation of Mawdudi as I do not read Urdu. The English translation of Mawdudi's commentary can be found on a number of websites, including Internet Archive (https://thequranexplorer.com/tafsir/tafheem-ul-quran, https://archive.org/details/Maududi-Tafhim-al-Quran-The_Meaning_of_the_Quran), Quranx.com (https://quranx.com/Tafsir/Maududi/1.1), and EnglishTafsir.com (https://www.englishtafsir.com/). I do read Arabic fluently and have utilized the Arabic editions of Ibn Kathīr as well as other Arabic tafsirs.

[3] Edward Curtis, *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction,* ed. Edward Curtis, (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 3.

(2) the rationalist *The Message of the Qur'an*, by the Austrian Jewish convert to Islam, Muhammad Asad, and

(3) the abridgment by the Salafi Indian scholar Mubarakpūrī of the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Kathīr's hadith-based *tafsir*, which was translated into English and published by the Saudi-based institution of Darussalam.[4]

These works are representative of three major influential trends in contemporary Islam. In her study of Qur'anic interpretations of Muslims today, Johanna Pink uses the categories of the 'ulamā', Modernists, Islamists, Salafis and Postmodern approaches.[5] The main works that I examine overlap with the categories of Salafi (Ibn Kathīr in its Mubārakpūrī abridgement) and Islamist (Mawdudi). However, I see Asad as sharing concerns of both the 'ulamā and Modernists. I then supplement a study of these three commentators and their commentaries on two chapters of the Qur'an with brief overviews of some contemporary North American Muslim commentaries on the same chapters in order to show how they are re-reading the same passages to connect scripture more directly to contemporary concerns.

The three contemporary Qur'anic commentaries that I examine are important sources of influence and contestation because they attempt to address the concerns of their contemporary readers, even as they selectively cite older exegetical works. Exegetical material is marshaled in ways the commentary authors believe are most effective or beneficial for cultivating or fashioning pious selves. Choices and selections are made. I seek to unpack these choices and highlight how

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[4] Hadiths are sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him. For an accessible introduction to the subject of hadith, see Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

[5] Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2019), 11-12.

the same Qur'anic narratives are read to emphasize as well as de-emphasize certain themes and how commentaries sometimes even offer novel readings of the narratives. Examples of these choices include how commentators may seek to engage with modern fields of knowledge, such as discoveries in historiography or archeology, as legitimate and noteworthy sources for commentary on the Qur'anic narratives. Others may seek to present Islam as a modern, rational religion, free from what they view as superstition or legends. Commentators differ in their willingness to embrace biblical material and mystical readings of Qur'anic verses. All together, these three contemporary readings agree that the Qur'an has a special role in providing guidance for contemporary Muslims, especially in what they may perceive to be an environment hostile to a faithful or devout worldview.

Anouar Majid has argued that many postcolonial theorists, due to modern prejudices and beliefs in ideas of progress and the shedding of outdated religious beliefs and practices, have not given sufficient attention to how religious interpretations shape postcolonial subjects. Majid writes, "With very few exceptions, postcolonial critics never seriously examined the place of Islam in debates of multiculturalism. The challenge of including Islamic subjectivities and cultural epistemologies into a world of equal differences has been left untheorized, probably because the religious imaginary is dismissed ahead of time as either conservative or unredeemable."[6] Muslims have a right, Majid argues, to be understood on their own terms, and I hope that this dissertation will contribute toward appreciating and analyzing the various streams of interpretation that contemporary Muslims have engaged with in the recent few decades.

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6 Anouar Majid, *Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), vii.

In our age of "disenchantment," to invoke Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, the orthodoxies of scientism and reason, historical investigation, and "facticity" are supposed to put an end to the foolish myths and unnecessary religious or moral guidelines previously believed to be necessary for collective human flourishing.[7] I hope this dissertation can provide insights into how the current contestations over proper practice and understanding of the Qur'an, and Islam more broadly, will shape the future of Muslims and Islam.

A Renewed Emphasis on Understanding What the Qur'an Means

As Johanna Pink writes, for eighteenth and nineteenth century revivalists a pressing question was "How could the Qur'an be a source of guidance if exegetes led endless debates about the myriad linguistic and dogmatic aspects related to any given exegetical problem. Here the ideas of modernists...converged with those of conservative scripturalists who…aimed at reconstructing a pure Islamic society from the scriptural sources, based not on the authority of Muslim scholars, but on the imperatives of the Qur'an and the Sunna."[8] Thus, the Qur'an was centered in the modern period, as a source of guidance in a distinct manner from previous scholastic exegesis. Pink continues, writing how these contemporary Qur'anic commentators "proclaim their intention to dispense with needless disputes and distractions such as *kalām,* philosophy, technical discussions or *isrā'īliyyāt.* Instead, guidance (*hidāya)* is a pervasive goal of exegesis, and that most commonly means a focus on the legal and ethical contents of the Qur'an."[9]

7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Boston: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[8] Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today,* 20.

[9] Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today,* 20.

A Bangladeshi American sociologist at Boston University, Nazli Kibria, writes about a transformation in the relationship with the Qur'anic text between immigrant parents and their children. This transformation occurs as Muslim parents who migrated to the US from Bangladesh are pressed by their children to move beyond seeing the Qur'an simply as a devotional text to be recited in Arabic.[10] Kibria highlights that American-born children want to know what the text means.[11] A mother Kibria interviewed says,

> And then when my brother read the Qur'an to my older son he challenged us and asked us to explain the meaning. Since it is in Arabic we are then forced to look up the translation. It has been an education for us. It is a good thing, this American questioning of everything; we did not grow up like that.[12]

Interestingly, this shift in their relationship to the Qur'an is presented as something which particularly manifests in the American pedagogical context, with its emphasis on understanding and critically engaging with a text, rather than simply engaging in "rote memorization."[13] The parents attribute this change in emphasis to their being in America ("this American questioning of everything") rather than to a more general inquisitiveness and search for meaning. Yet, if we pause to reflect, we ought to note that it is not only American Muslims who seek to gain an appreciation

10 Let me emphasize that one can appreciate the Qur'an on multiple levels, both as a sacred text to be recited devotionally as well as a text to be engaged with intellectually and with one's heart and mind and soul. In this connection, Ingrid Mattson writes of how "for the early Muslims, such reports were cherished like oral relics connecting them to his [the Prophet's] blessed presence." Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 25.

11 This is not to say that individuals outside the US do not give importance to meanings of what they are reading.

12 Nazli Kibria, *Muslims in Motion: Islam and the National Identity in the Bangladeshi Diaspora* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 69.

13 See Mattson's *Story of the Qur'an* for a critique of this term and the value of memorizing texts at a young age and then seeking to unpack them intellectually as one gains the tools to do so and grows in maturity.

of Qur'anic interpretation. We should be cautious of such rhetorical moves that attribute this push for deeper understanding of the Qur'an simply to be a function of "Americanization," as some recent immigrants to the US do, perhaps because they are often pressed to express patriotism as their belonging is questioned. Indeed, in my own case, it was my father, who migrated from Bangladesh, who impressed on me the importance of understanding the Qur'anic text, above and beyond memorizing its words.

I should also note that many modern assumptions are at work in the contemporary public discourse about Qur'an schools and how the Qur'an should be taught today. Rote memorization is routinely condemned and seen as useless in the hegemonic reading of European philosophers from Descartes onwards that focus on cultivating a rational, agentive subject that is detached from the body.[14] As Ingrid Mattson points out, from colonial times, "memorization of the Qur'an was often dismissed as 'rote learning' and characterized as an unthinking absorption of tradition."[15] Mattson responds to this characterization by noting the creativity and impressive scholarly and intellectual activity that Muslim scholars who started their education with memorization of the Qur'an then produced. She writes, "Traditional Islamic pedagogy was by no means a necessary impediment to intellectual growth and creativity."[16] She draws on a scholar of education, Helen Boyle, who studied Muslim educational institutions in Morocco, Nigeria, and Yemen. Boyle wrote about the process of embodiment that occurs with memorization of the Qur'an, whereby "the mind and body are intricately linked and as such both are implicated in the processes of mental and physical

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[14] I am especially grateful to Professor Katherine Ewing for helping me think through and articulate this point.

15 Mattson, *Story of the Qur'an*, 123.

16 Mattson, 123.

activities that constitute cultural production."[17] Memorization of the Qur'an, thus, starts the process of one's learning and is not the end.

Regarding the broader shift in attitudes toward Qur'an schools, Rudolph Ware writes about assumptions made by modern observers regarding the lack of pedagogical value in the memorization that often is prioritized in Muslim schools:

> West African Qur'an schools have often been maligned. In the past century and a half Muslims and non-Muslims alike have increasingly found fault with them. Qur'an teachers rarely explain the meaning of verses to children, focusing instead on recitation and memorization, and leading many observers to conclude that such schools are pedagogically backwards.[18]

The Qur'an in the broader, nonmodern approach is seen as transformational: students in the Qur'an schools are supposed to become "walking Qur'ans," an allusion to the description of the Prophet Muhammad by his wife A'isha as a "walking Qur'an." This statement pushes us to think beyond a textualist approach, with the modern connotations of what a text is—usually, a book: printed or written pages between two covers. Ware's conceptualization of the Qur'an, with an emphasis on its relationship to character formation, highlights an embodied aspect that is often overlooked by the textualist approach. Muslims are told to look at how the Prophet lived his life and interacted with others to understand what the Qur'an means. This challenges us to change our notion of exegesis from merely a textual practice to an embodied practice.

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17 Helen N. Boyle, *Quranic Schools: Agents of Preservation and Change* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2004), 70–73, cited in Mattson, *Story of the Qur'an*, 124.
18 Rudolph T. Ware, *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa /* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 2.

In the wake the rise of the Taliban in the nineties and then after 9/11, much was made of madrasas and the lack of intellectual stimulation and the lack of career mobility that result from such a religious education.[19] Many contemporary Muslims and non-Muslim observers have stigmatized and expressed grave concerns concerning madrasas or Islamic places of learning.[20] As Ebrahim Moosa writes, "Muslim seminaries, or madrasas, everywhere became stigmatized once the Taliban was linked to the terror mastermind Osama bin Laden." He continues, "In popular Western media parlance, the mere mention of the word 'madrasa' conjures up an 'us versus them' dynamic."[21]

Still, among many Muslim communities, a notion of respect and an attribution of closeness to God can be found in carrying the "words of God" in one's heart for individuals who have memorized the Qur'an, called *hafiz*. As F. E. Peters writes, "The Quran clings more tenaciously to its orality: the *hafiz*, the Quran memorizer who has the whole text by heart, is a revered and still common figure in Islamic society."[22] Not everyone who memorizes Qur'an goes on to pursue Islamic seminary or madrasa education. Madrasas, in many contexts, continue to struggle for gaining respect as an institution for higher education. However, it is in the madrasa, where one would receive education and training with accessing a scholastic commentary on the Qur'an. More accessible Qur'anic commentaries, not requiring madrasa education, have proliferated in the modern period.

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19 It was in this context that Ebrahim Moosa wrote his essay, "Inside a Madrasa," for the *Boston Review* in January 2007: http://bostonreview.net/moosa-inside-madrasa.

20 For example, see Robert Hefner, *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, eds. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Q. Zaman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 1.

21 Ebrahim Moosa, *What is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 1-2.

22 F. E. Peters, *The Voice, The Word, The Books: The Sacred Scripture of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 151.

Commentaries on the Qur'anic text have proliferated in the contemporary period, and not simply in the US. This is demonstrated, for example, by the many vernacular translations of the Qur'an[23] and the broader South Asian Qur'anic commentary literature, which SherAli Tareen has recently surveyed.[24] I highlight this point to emphasize that the phenomenon of Qur'anic engagement is not unique to the American context. Contemporary Muslims are engaging with the Qur'an with a renewed vigor and vitality throughout the world, especially in new intellectual centers of Islam.

Although I am interested in the field of Islam in the United States, Islam(s) in America are intimately linked with transnational actors and networks and nodes of influence. In her study of South Asian Muslim Americans, Tahseen Shams demonstrates that the interconnectivity of "the immigrants' homeland, hostland and 'elsewhere' together shape immigrants' lives."[25] In other words, we need to be attentive to the various directions of streams of influence on identity groups, but particularly to that of recent immigrants in an era of intense globalization. Furthermore, the line of influence does not only occur in one direction (i.e., from the Muslim majority lands to the non-Muslim majority context) but, as Masooda Bano notes in *The Revival of Islamic Rationalism*, increasingly, American or Western Muslims are influencing Muslims in Muslim majority countries.[26]

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23 A project currently led by Qur'anic scholar Johanna Pink seeks to document and study the many translations of the Qur'an in various languages. See GloQur: The Global Qur'an (funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program), https://gloqur.de/.

24 SherAli Tareen, "South Asian Qur'an Commentaries and Translations: A Preliminary Intellectual History," *ReOrient* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 233–256.

25 Tahseen Shams, *Here, There, and Elsewhere: The Making of Immigrant Identities in a Globalized World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 3. "Elsewheres" are places that are neither the immigrants' homeland nor hostland but that are nonetheless important to immigrants' identity formation (3).

26 Masooda Bano, *The Revival of Islamic Rationalism: Logic, Metaphysics and Mysticism in Modern Muslim Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

How Muslims go about interpreting the Qur'an as a central text of their religious devotion and practice is an extremely important area that is deserving of attention which it has not hitherto received. The commentaries I study in this dissertation were written and shaped by the environments of their writers in the postcolonial Muslim majority countries of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia as well as, for Muhammad Asad, in Western Europe. The commentaries became popular in the US through processes involving international students, immigrants, and recent converts to Islam in search of religious literature. This transnational heritage is important to note, as American Muslims did not start producing literature and trends from scratch but rather through engagement with exegetical works produced in the middle of the twentieth century in various languages, including Urdu,[27] Arabic, and English. American Muslims, as Timur Yuskaev puts it, "in this era of globalization were formulating their Qur'anic interpretations while being in constant contact with international Muslim conversations. At the same time, their expressions of specifically contemporary concerns were now more pronounced as well."[28]

In particular, the generation of Muslims that migrated to the US in the 1960s and afterward often came with various preexisting relationships to the literature and social movements that emerged in their places of origin or, more broadly, from Muslim centers of thought. They may have come into greater contact with a diverse array of approaches as they congregated with other Muslims in urban centers, especially in US universities. Furthermore, some American Muslims, such as those whom Zareena Grewal has studied, went to Muslim majority countries in search of

27 For a recent study on Urdu works that were printed in the twentieth century, see Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and The Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

28 Timur Yuskaev, *Speaking Qur'an: an American Scripture* (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 8.

Islamic knowledge.[29] As visiting students, they had to navigate the debates and various approaches in the Muslim majority contexts, including how to view the scholars and institutions with their various associations and political projects. Keeping these developments in mind, in this dissertation I map out three influential strands within global Islam that compete for followings within the American Muslim community: a Revivalist/Islamist/"Activist" trend, a Salafi or authentic hadith–centering trend, and a rationalist kalām-informed trend. With these caveats and renewed attention on understanding the Qur'an in mind, I turn to questions of multiplicity of meaning in the text.

Multiple Ways to Read the Qur'an

Shahab Ahmed has argued that there are multiple levels of meaning in the Qur'an, and they can be simultaneously embraced.[30] He writes that "the conceptual and practical production and accommodation of *internal contradiction* [was] crucial to the constitution of the human and historical phenomenon of Islam."[31] He further elaborates how polyvalent interpretations, the "Bengal-to-Balkans" Islamic literary traditions, and a richness of readings of the Qur'an were quite widespread in the broad Qur'anic exegetical library and lived commentary of premodern Islam. This rich, multilayered variety of approaches to interpreting the Qur'an becomes truncated in the contemporary period, where much of the exegetical tradition is dismissed as "inauthentic" and "legend." Furthermore, while many Muslims and non-Muslim scholars share the view that Muslims borrowed from biblical material, many contemporary Muslims advocate that such

29 Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University, 2014).
30 Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

31 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?,* 302.

traditions should be excised from proper tafsir.[32] This leads to a great impoverishment of the tafsir traditions; many of the various levels of interpretation that historically existed have become marginalized in contemporary Islam. Nevertheless, remnants of these rich traditions can be found, examples of which I try to highlight in the commentaries under study.

The modern period has witnessed immense reductionism in the approach of Muslims to their scripture. Modernist exegesis places a heavy emphasis on relating Qur'anic narratives to modern historical discoveries. Of the three commentators I examine, establishing modern historical facticity of Qur'anic narratives is especially a concern for Mawdudi. He, like most devout Muslims, takes the Qur'anic narratives to be true—but the truth for him means using modern archaeology to demonstrate facticity. This is different from other approaches to interpreting scripture that emphasize personal and abstract lessons that can be taken away from the reading. (Mawdudi does both.) The Qur'an itself employs what we may call a minimalist approach to most narratives, not being chiefly concerned with providing details or chronologies or naming places and individuals. These types of details, on the other hand, are an essential concern of historians. It is crucial to recognize the difference between investigating "What really happened?" to asking "Why did this narrative matter to an audience?"[33]

The move from memory to history marks a shift from mythos to facticity.[34] This mythos approach, which does not assert that the narratives as myths are false, sees narratives as moral

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32 For a fifteenth century Muslim scholar's viewpoint that biblical sources should be embraced, see Walid Saleh, *al-Biqa'ī In defense of the Bible: a critical edition and an introduction to al-Biqāʿī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
33 See Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans., and with an introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

34 For accessible takes on mythos, see Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (Anchor Books, 2020), and *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh, UK: Canongate, 2005). See also Richard L. Sartore, ed., *Joseph Campbell on Myth and Mythology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).

exhortations that can be deeply personal and universal. The modern shift includes a fixation on trying to ground these narratives in modern historiography, thus centering on identifying figures, regions, and chronologies. William Smith insightfully draws attention to how many academics "miss the poetry" of scriptures—misreading the poetry in their obsession with scientific fact and verifying stories with modern historical methods.[35] Smith points to the situatedness and historicity of not just what we study but those who study:

> Not only what we study is historical, however; so, too, is our study of it. Students, inquirers, academics, also participate in the historical process: at a particular time and place, coming out of a particular background and moving forwards to a situation less determinate. The pursuit of truth, too, takes its conditioned place in a historical development. Scripture, whatever else it may additionally be, is a historical phenomenon. The understanding of scripture, whatever else it may additionally be, is also an historical phenomenon. The understanding of scripture that is becoming possible, truer than any that have gone before, is possible because we can now construct it on the basis of a new critical awareness of what has gone before it.[36]

New York University president emeritus and religion professor John Sexton points to approaches to scripture that move away from emphasizing that which is quantifiable—for example, in understanding "six days" in the creation narrative literally.[37] Alternatively, one can emphasize gaining an appreciation for the "ineffable," to use the term employed by Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel (1907–1972), which asserts that the Divine cannot adequately be contained or captured by the limitations of words or prisms of language.[38] This approach emphasizes the world

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35 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 66.
36 Smith, 68.

[37] John Edward Sexton, *Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game* (New York: Gotham Books, 2013).

[38] Heschel poetically writes, "To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words. […] The tangent to the curve of human experience lies beyond the limits of language. the world of things we perceive is but a veil. Its flutter is music, its ornament science, but what it conceals is inscrutable. It's silence remains unbroken; no words can carry it away. Sometimes we wish the world could cry and tell us about that which made it pregnant with fear--filling grandeur. Sometimes we wish our own heart would speak of that which made it heavy with wonder."

of parables and the mysteries of language, as Muhammad Asad advocate in their respective Qur'anic commentaries. I evoke mythos to get at the idea of reading narratives as indicative of archetypes and the rich possibilities a narrative can potentially provide. Many modern believers, however, are increasingly preoccupied with the mode of reading narratives historically or scientifically, emphasizing questions such as when did these narratives take place, who were the individuals involved, and what can be established about them using modern historical methods.

The approach of reading these narratives as mainly moral exhortations provides wider flexibility—such as that found in the poetry of Rumi and Jami and others who play on narratives mentioned in the Qur'an, flesh out some of the implications of these stories, and develop them in intriguing ways. Modern Muslim commentators, such as Mawdudi and Salafi interpreters, obsessed with historicity and authenticity, tend to dismiss these works of imagination as lacking roots in the authentic tradition; they largely consider works such as Jami's love poem of Yūsuf and Zulaykha or the many narrations around Khidr, who appears in the eighteenth Qur'anic chapter (al-Kahf), as mere legends and superstitions. Many contemporary commentators tend to be fixated on investigating the historical identities of individuals named in the Qur'an, such as Dhul Qarnanyn or Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj (Gog and Magog), who are also mentioned in the eighteenth chapter. Symbolic readings of these figures get marginalized in the contemporary approach as the Qur'an is increasingly read as a book of history. I will come back to exploring these narratives in greater detail in the coming chapters.

Abraham Joshua Heschel. *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion,* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951), 16.

In showcasing commentaries representative of three schools of thought in contemporary Islam, I must emphasize how the boundaries among the three schools are not very rigid and that many Muslims hold views belonging to various schools of thought at the same time. Furthermore, their specific situations and goals do not fall neatly into these categories. One could be a Sufi, a *mutakallim* (dialectical or speculative theologian), a hadith scholar, or someone invested in community revival and even state-building initiatives.

Sura Yūsuf and Sura Kahf

In this dissertation, I focus on two Qur'anic chapters as case studies. Part of my justification for focusing on Sura Yūsuf and Sura Kahf is that these chapters provide many examples of both creative interpretation and more narrow interpretation, which helps to illustrate the difference in methodologies engaged by contemporary American Muslims. Sura Yūsuf and Sura Kahf largely consist of narratives, or *qaṣaṣ*, which according to some scholars make up a third of the Qur'an. Rather than legal verses or theological discussions of God's attributes, for example, these Qur'anic narratives provide much flexibility for interpreters to mold their interpretations or to use them as backdrops to articulate their own concerns. Thus, narratives are particularly rich places to examine the differences among the three commentators I am focusing on (Mawdudi, Asad, and Ibn Kathīr in its abridged Salafi version).

These suras are two of the most commented-on Qur'anic chapters, both in the premodern and contemporary periods. So many manuscripts exist of tafsir on Sura Yūsuf,[39] and the chapter is widely known and discussed in the Muslim community, perhaps because, unlike other chapters, it

39 This insight was shared by Jawad Qureishi, who examined the manuscript libraries in writing his article on Sura Yūsuf: Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Ring Composition in Sūrat Yūsuf (Q12)," *Journal International Qur'anic Studies Association* (IQSA) 2 (2017): 149–168.

features one narrative exclusively; this sura also provides both common and disparate ground for American Muslims to be in conversation with their Jewish and Christian neighbors.[40] Furthermore, Muslims often recite Sura Kahf every Friday because of a hadith exhorting them to do so as protection from the Antichrist (Dajjal), especially in the end of times.

Works in English on Sura Yūsuf and Sura Kahf include stand-alone volumes, for example, books by the founder of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad's (1897–1975) son, W. D. Mohammed (1933–2008); the Wahhabi Saudi scholar Ibn Uthaymin (1929–2001), translated into English from the Arabic; and individual works by the Indian scholar Abul Hasan Nadwi (1914–1999) and Mawdudi's student Khurshid Ahmad (b. 1932). The contemporary "ex-Salafi" Madinah University and Yale University graduate Yasir Qadhi (b. 1975) recently published two books, one each on Sura Kahf and Sura Yūsuf.[41] Furhan Zubairi, a Deobandi-trained scholar who teaches at the Institute of Knowledge in California, recently published a book that offers commentary on Sura Kahf.

YouTube is another source of commentary by American Muslim speakers on these two chapters. For example, Nouman Ali Khan (b. 1978), the Pakistani American televangelist who runs an institute called Bayyinah, which focuses on explaining the Qur'an in English, has a fifty-part series on Sura Yūsuf, where he also reads the biblical chapters on Joseph and engages in some comparative discussions. Dr. Ingrid Mattson (b. 1963), formerly of Hartford Seminary and former president of the largest American Muslim national organization, Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), has an hour-long lecture on Sura Yūsuf, as does the American Muslim activist Imam,

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40 I owe the latter insight to a conversation with Professor Zareena Grewal.

[41] In 2014, after an exposition of key Salafī tenets, and his assessments of positive and negative aspects of the movement, Qadhi writes, "Because of this, I no longer view myself as being a part of any of these Salafī trends discussed in the earlier section." https://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/22/on-salafi-islam-dr-yasir-qadhi/4/

Omar Suleiman (b. 1986). YouTube is an important site of spreading ideas and religious teachings, especially in the American Muslim community.[42]

In addition to the three main texts that I examine in this dissertation, I also provide overviews of some of these contemporary commentaries on the two chapters of Sura Yūsuf and Sura Kahf.

Approaches to Texts and the Importance of Contextual Readings

Even as the three Muslim commentators Mawdudi, Asad, and Ibn Kathīr attempt to comment on what they see as God's eternal words, their insights are intensely reflective of concerns from their specific lived experiences. In the Islamic studies field and in public discourse, texts, including the Qur'anic scripture, have too often been assumed to be fixed and unchanging in their interpretation, without any attention given to the context in which they were formulated or are read. This is clearly a problematic approach. Instead, we must account for how readers engage with texts, which is why the commentators' biographical information and context are so important. Commentators, even as they are in conversation with a tradition of commentaries (tafsirs), are by nature selective about which voices and positions from the premodern tradition they highlight. Therefore, the context of their authors and their various reform projects in constructing a pious Muslim self must be duly accounted for in our assessment of these texts. Edward Said persuasively cautions against fetishizing ancient texts and freezing them instead of paying attention to conversations with living beings in order to understand contemporary phenomena. Said notes that how the Qur'an as it "is interpreted and lived immediately moves away from" an essentialized

42 For a study of YouTube Islam, see Ahmed Al-Rawi, *Islam on YouTube: Online Debates, Protests, and Extremism* (New York: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2017).

view of the Qur'an as a frozen, static entity."[43] Attention to interpretations of the Qur'an alerts us to the multiplicity of contestations regarding how to understand and practice the faith in the contemporary world.

In this dissertation, I combine textual analysis with attention to lived experiences. I highlight diversity—different sets of emphases—both in the commentary tradition and in how contemporary Muslims read and approach the Qur'an. In a move away from centering "classical" or premodern texts as the core of Islam or as *the* texts that best explain contemporary belief and practice, I center contemporary texts and commentaries as worthy of study. I hope this will contribute to discussions on Muslims and scripture and allow for a much more robust public conversation beyond the framing of Muslims into simplistic labels of fundamentalist versus liberal.[44] Undoubtably, the Qur'an occupies a special place in the religious literature that Muslims esteem, study, interpret, and try to live their lives according to the guidance of. Tafsir also has an incredible history of development, some of which is increasingly being given attention in the Western academy.[45] As highlighted by Johanna Pink, "Qur'ānic exegesis is an intellectual

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43 Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 57.

44 Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2: 323–347. Mahmood documents how government think tanks push for certain types of Islams, favoring especially Sufis as supposedly more conducive to the welfare of the world. See also Rosemary Corbett on Feisal Abdul Rauf and his father, Muhammad Abdul Rauf, and the American Enterprise Institute and their advocacy for a compatibility between Islam and liberal capitalism and their endorsement of enrollment of Muslims in the US military, especially after 9/11. Rosemary R. Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

45 For a useful introduction to tafsīr works in English, see Helmut Gatje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations* [in German], trans. Alford T. Welch (1971; repr., Oxford: Oneworld, 1996). Gatje refers to the modern Azhari Muḥammad Ḥusain al-Dhahabī (1915-1977), *At-tafsīr wa-l-mufassirūn* (Exegesis and the exegetes), 3 vols. (Cairo: 1381 AH/1961–1962 CE). I appreciate that the importance of this work was stressed to me by Shaykh Dr. Jawad Qureshi. Walid Saleh challenges some of al-Dhahabī's framings by looking at a "marginal" Tunisian scholar's work on the history of tafsīr in *al-Tafsīr wa rijāluhū*. See Walid Saleh, "Marginalia and Peripheries: A Tunisian Historian and the History of Qurānic Exegesis," *Numen* 58, no. 2–3 (January 1, 2011): 285–286.

phenomenon that happens in a specific social context in which individual interpretations are pushed to prominence or marginalized."[46]

I challenge the textualist traditions of both Muslim scholars and non-Muslim academics who mistakenly presume that only classical texts are worth studying to understand what Islam is today. The recent past, including modern and contemporary developments, is immensely important to consider appreciating Islam in its complexity, as Kevin Reinhart argues in his recent *Lived Islam*.[47] The textualist approach has severe shortcomings, especially when it comes to the modern period. For example, in a critical review of Michael Cook's *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*, Bruce Lawrence writes, "Speaking with the unqualified voice of an outside expert, he [Cook] pursues a level of comparison that projects Islam into a wholesale scriptural/juridical category that can be examined across time, diachronically, without extensive synchronic attention to internal Islamic differences."[48] Another assumption that runs through Cook's work, according to Lawrence, is that "the modern is addressing, and trying to reform, the premodern. We are modern and secular and those in need of correction are premodern and primarily/instinctually religious." Lawrence argues that it is not merely "ancient texts or premodern practices" that "elevated" religion in the contemporary period. Attention must be paid to colonialism or "European intervention" (or in Cook's formulation "European expansion"), which is largely ignored to in Cook's analysis. Lawrence's intervention is to highlight that "not only the colonial legacy but also

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46 Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 12.

47 A. Kevin Reinhart, *Lived Islam: Colloquial Religion in a Cosmopolitan Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

48 Bruce Lawrence, Review of Michael Cook's *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics*, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* 85: 2 (2017), 556.

contradictions within the modern world, asymmetries of both power and knowledge, as well as education, class, and mobility – all are markers of identity and difference that could and should be acknowledged, yet they are absent from Cook's hyper-textual analysis."[49] It is hoped that this dissertation and analysis of contemporary Qur'anic commentaries and their commentators moves beyond freezing Muslims into the fixed category of the "premodern" and demonstrates concrete examples of how contemporary Muslims are reinterpreting Muslim scripture that sees the text as a living one.

Instead of reifying the premodern or "classical" period, I hope to join an appreciation for the enormous scholastic output of Muslim scholars as well embrace the full dynamic humanity and complexity of lived experiences. Both can be done together, as a growing number of scholars of Islam have begun to do. I hope to contribute to this project in this dissertation. Contrast the old, Orientalist way of thinking with the perspective advocated in the transcript of an interview of Bruce Lawrence by Ali Atif Mian, titled "The Future of Islamic Studies:" Mian speaks of his admiration for Lawrence's centering of the lives of the authors of commentaries and biographies to understand various works of Qur'anic exegesis. Mian appreciates "both the biography of a text but also how readers' responses to scripture are mediated by their historical and social location."[50] Lawrence echoes this, stating, "Looking at individuals and thinking about how they use the Qur'an gives you a distinctive window into its meaning." Lawrence examines reception of the Qur'anic text by both "insiders" and "outsiders."[51]

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[49] Lawrence, 558.

[50] Bruce Lawrence and Ali Altaf Mian, *The Bruce B. Lawrence Reader: Islam Beyond Borders* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 410.

[51] Lawrence and Mian, *The Bruce B. Lawrence Reader,* 411.

While texts play an important role, we must not reduce peoples' motivations and complexity to fixed readings of them. Sherman Jackson strongly makes this point in his introduction to a study of the transformation of a violent extremist group in Egypt that wrote treatises demonstrating their change in thinking through study of religious texts while in prison:

> Finally, texts alone are not autonomously self-determinative of the uses to which they are put. The same Qur'ān, Sunna, and writings of Ibn Taymīya that were deployed by 'Abd al-Salām Faraj in his incendiary *The Neglected Duty* (al-Farīḍah al-ghā'ibah) were deployed by the Gamā'ah's Historical Leadership in promoting and vindicating their Initiative to Stop the Violence. Clearly, in such light, to continue to assign independent, determinative agency to ancient religious texts or authorities, as if existential circumstances—repression, humiliation, prison, occupation, civilizational domination, or intellectual maturation—contribute nothing to the ways in which these are read and pressed into service, is to fall victim to the structure's of one's own ideological prism, ultimately resulting in what might amount to a form of "reverse fundamentalism," or in Amitai Etzioni's words, a species of "Multiple Realism Deficiency Disorder."[52]

Some academics have focused on trying to uncover the original meaning or what the text might have meant to the first receiving audience when it was articulated or pronounced in the world. Most Muslim commentators in the scholarly tafsir tradition cite positions from previous works of exegesis and investigations. Some recent academics, exemplified by the Notre Dame professor Gabriel Reynolds have tried to place the Qur'an's context squarely within a late antique context of seventh-century Arabia with the surrounding Byzantine and Persian Empires. In focusing on contemporary Muslim commentaries on the Qur'an, I am advocating against the approach of Reynolds, for whom the post-Qur'anic literature has virtually no value. Reynolds is chiefly interested in questions of origins, philology, "original meaning," and "borrowing" from Christianity, Syriac contexts, and Judaism, particularly in the late antiquity milieu, for Prophet

52 Sherman Jackson's introduction to his translation of *Initiative to Stop the Violence (Mubādarat Waqf al-'Unf): Sadat's Assassins and the Renunciation of Political Violence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 46–47.

Muhammad and Islam.[53] This emphasis on the origins has been quite extensive, as Schōller notes: "Without exaggeration, the research into the supposed Jewish or Christian roots of early Islam and hence of its scripture may be said to be the lasting heritage of early twentieth-century qur'ānic studies, having had by far the most wide-reaching influence until the present day."[54]

Western Islamicists, supposedly objective writers and scholars of Qur'anic studies, especially in NELC (Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations) departments today, are preoccupied with questions of origins and biblical borrowings and civilizational debts that Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an owe to others who came before them. Some Western academic approaches, under the guise of objectivity, hide their own situatedness and assumptions and come to dissect Muslim experiences as inauthentic: the Muslim subjects under study (whether in the colonial gaze or today) are not to be taken at their word; they cannot be trusted. This approach can be placed in a larger colonial history, where, for example, the British colonial administrators are on record for completely devaluing the knowledge possessed by those they colonized. Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–1859) famously quipped, "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."[55] To put it simply, many Europeans did not recognize the people they colonized as having true knowledge.

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53 See Gabriel Reynolds, ed., *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* **(**London: Routledge, 2008), *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context 2* **(**Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis, 2011); Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, Qur'ān trans. Ali Quli Qarai (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

54 Marco Schōller, "Post-Enlightenment Academic Study of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 187–205, 195.

55 Thomas Babington, better known as Lord Macaulay, was a British politician and colonial administrator (President, General Committee of Public Instruction). His remark appeared in Minute on Education (February 2, 1835)."

Timur Yuskaev has explored how American Muslims "have been interpreting their sacred text to make sense of it and their experiences."[56] Paying attention to the context in which texts are read and interpreted, Yuskaev elaborates, "Words—and sacred texts—acquire different shades of meanings in different settings."[57] All of this contributes to "deflect the reductionism that surrounds Islam as a political object in our post-9/11 culture."[58] Mun'im Sirry has also investigated the specific challenge of interpreting "polemical" passages from the Qur'an that are directed toward members of other religious communities. In his study, he asks,

> How have the polemical texts of the Qur'an been interpreted by modern Muslim reformers? To what extent have their modern contexts shaped and been shaped by their understanding of the Qur'an? Is there room for interpreting the Qur'an's political texts differently for nonpolemical interactions among different religions in the modern world?[59]

Johanna Pink describes her approach as one which "treats Qur'ānic exegesis as an intellectual phenomenon that happens in a specific social context in which individual interpretations are pushed to prominence or marginalised."[60] In this dissertation, I build on the insights of Pink, Jackson, Lawrence, Mian, Yuskaev, and Sirry in their attention to the lived experiences and contexts of the authors of Qur'anic commentaries. I highlight, study, and interpret what I see as significant differences and influences in the texts that these communities are reading.

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56 Timur Yuskaev, *Speaking Qur'an*, 3.

57 Yuskaev, 7.

58 Lawrence and Mian, 410. The words quoted here are Mian's.

59 Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'ān and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

60 Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2019), 12.

Now one may fairly ask why, out of the many commentaries that exist, I chose these three. Any substantive exploration must have boundaries and limits, but to answer this question most insightfully, I tell my own story and trace the substantial influences of the various religious trends and groups I have encountered.

My Story

My upbringing strongly emphasized the importance of knowledge and learning, especially through the efforts of my father. I was tutored at home in the Arabic language, Qur'anic interpretation, and hadith and Qur'an memorization. I was a sophomore in high school when 9/11 happened just three blocks away. As a witness to such catastrophe, I was pressed to seek out resources to help me make sense of contemporary Islam and Muslim scholars and teachers and what Muslim intellectuals had to say about what was going on. I was very involved with my high school MSA (Muslim Students Association) group, and after high school, for four years, I pursued a seminary program with some American Muslim teachers at the Zaytuna Institute in the San Francisco Bay Area. After completing that program, I pursued a concentration in "Islam in America" at the Gallatin School of Individualized Studies at New York University before starting my PhD at Columbia in 2014. This has been a long journey of not only seeking knowledge but also trying to situate the different strands of contemporary Islam and how they manifest in the interpretation of the holy book for Muslims, the Qur'an.

My parents migrated to the United States from Sylhet, Bangladesh. My siblings and I grew up in Alphabet City / the Lower East Side / East Village in Manhattan. In terms of our religious education, my dad prioritized understanding the Arabic language rather than simply learning how to read the Qur'an. He hired local Bangladeshi Imams to come to our home and tutor my siblings and me. My father encouraged my sister and me to memorize Sura al-Mulk (Q67), which is recited

every night, especially because of the hadith about its virtue in protecting one from punishment in the grave. He rewarded us with one hundred dollars on completion of our memorization of that chapter and Sura Yasin (Q36).

In 1998, when I was eleven years old, my family of eight siblings, two parents, and I visited Medina and Mecca for a week each, and then Sylhet. After this trip, my family became more religiously oriented and increased our practice and devotion to our religion. During the trip to Medina, I visited the University of Medina, which, as I will discuss later in detail, is an important node of Salafi influence. Saudi Arabia has leveraged its recent oil riches to spread a Salafi form of Islam, especially through the distribution of translations of the Qur'an and hadith and other theological texts, usually free of charge to pilgrims, many of them from the US. After we returned to New York from this pilgrimage, my siblings and I undertook further studies in Islam. We started taking more lessons in the Arabic language and began a study of commentary on two of the Qur'an's chapters, Sura al-Anfal (Q8) and Sura al-Tawba (Q9).

The Qur'anic commentary we utilized for our study was the Salafi commentary compiled by Muhsin Khan and al-Hilali, which is very hadith-based and concerned with taking out what the authors deem to be inauthentic hadiths. When one of my main childhood teachers was about to move, he offered me a choice between two Qur'anic commentaries that I could keep: the Arabic original Ibn Kathīr in four volumes or the English Khan-Hilali commentary in nine volumes. When he mentioned that he would find the English commentary useful himself, I chose to take the Ibn Kathīr volumes. I still have that set and have used it to compare some sections of the abridged translation with the original. I should note that both texts emphasize the hadith-based approach to tafsīr, which is one of the three trends or orientations I focus my dissertation on. I also want to point out how this teacher chose these sets of texts while being strongly associated with the Sylhet-

based Fultuli Sufi order, again highlighting how porous these boundaries between members of the various religious orientations are.

My sister and I also read hadiths in a collection entitled *Garden of the Righteous* (Riyadh al-Salihin) by the thirteenth-century Shafi' jurist, hadith scholar, and Sufi Nawawi (1234–1277). Nawawi's work is a hadith compilation intended for practice and does not get into detailed discussions of *fiqhi* differences, for example. It is considered a *kitab al-'amal*, as my teachers would say (meaning that it is meant to be implemented). The emphasis is on practice and not simply gathering knowledge or information. Another illustration of the Salafi influence on my interaction with this text is that I found online a publication of al-Albani's grading or classification of the hadith in Nawawi's collection in terms of their authenticity. I went through our copy of this text and copied Albani's gradings, especially when he considered a hadith to be weak.[61] This further demonstrates the renewed emphasis on hadith authentication as a chief means of practicing Islam with a notion of authenticity and purity, free from what are deemed to be accretions and weak practices that are not grounded or substantiated in the authentic practice of the Salaf. This is an example of how contemporary Muslims make choices and select elements from the traditions that are available to them.

On the importance of Arabic and the prioritization of Arabic over other languages (in my case, Bangla), I offer relate an anecdote about a time during the summer of 1999 when my siblings, neighborhood kids, and I studied with an Imam at the local mosque. The Imam informed us young students that our parents had requested that we learn some Bangla at the summer program; however, the Imam asked if we would like to do that or to learn Arabic, and we overwhelmingly

[61] The Salafi-oriented Albanian scholar Al-Albani has played an enormous role in questioning the authenticity of even canonical hadith collections. See Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

demanded to study Arabic. I offer this story to support my argument that for many American Muslims, especially for the children of immigrants, as their vernacular languages or the languages their parents were familiar with become marginalized, Arabic becomes more central, and English is growing in its importance as an Islamic language.

In high school, I worked with my Muslim Students Association (for which I served as co-vice-president and co-president) to petition and raise support and funds for the addition of Arabic as a foreign language course at Stuyvesant High School. Seeking outside support for this project, I wrote to university professors, and three from NYU, Columbia, and Georgetown wrote letters in support of our project. Our effort was briefly covered in the *New York Times* in an article entitled "Arabic Is in the News, How About at Stuyvesant?"[62]

I was blessed to memorize the entire Qur'an in Arabic and was encouraged by my father and local Imam to start learning the meanings of the Qur'an through studying the Arabic language and some of the commentary traditions (tafsir) and hadith. Learning Arabic was emphasized as well as seeking authentic hadith, as opposed to ones viewed as having weakness in their chains of transmission.

I did not grow up reading commentaries such as Mawdudi or Qutb or Muhammad Asad or *The Study Qur'an*, which only came out in 2015. I did pursue translations of the Qur'an such as that of Yūsuf Ali, which our local mosque distributed and which my father had a large copy of. I also had and often used the Muhsin Khan translation that the Saudi embassy distributed.

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62 Tara Bahrampour, "Arabic Is in the News, How About at Stuyvesant?" *New York Times*, February 1, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/01/nyregion/neighborhood-report-new-york-schools-arabic-about-stuyvesant.html; Sara G. Levin, "Stuyvesant Muslim Students Now Able to Study Arabic," *amNY*, September 13, 2005, https://www.amny.com/news/stuyvesant-muslim-students-now-able-to-study-arabic/. See also Molly Ono, "The Liminal Presence of Arabic in American Public Schools," May 3, 2017, http://debsedstudies.org/arabic-in-public-schools/.

The Bangladeshi American community I grew up in engaged the Qur'an in specific ways that were formative for me. Among our mix of influences was the Deobandi-associated Tablighi Jamaat movement, which stressed practice and reform through reading hadith compilations such as *Fadail al-Amal* and the aforementioned *Riyad al-Salihin.* The Salafi orientation stressed authentic hadiths, and their publications in the 1990s through the 2000s were extremely influential and carried the weight of being associated with the medieval authority of a figure such as Ibn Kathīr. My father and I purchased the ten-volume abridged Ibn Kathīr from a Brooklyn Salafi bookstore on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn called Darrusalam. I remember my father asking the bookseller for a translation of the full version, not an abridgment, but no such full translation had been produced in the English language (nor has it been to this day).[63]

I did not discover Muhammad Asad until I went to high school and his memoir, *The Road to Mecca*, was recommended. I valued it as a travelogue and story of conversion to Islam by an Austrian Jew with a background in rabbinical training. After 9/11, CAIR (the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the leading national Muslim civil rights organization) did a library promotion project and promoted his commentary on the Qur'an. I speculate that they chose this translation and commentary over others because they saw it as an accessible rationalist-oriented text that would appeal to American non-Muslim readers. I was also exposed to Thomas Cleary and Seyyed Hossein Nasr in high school, and they sometimes alluded to some mystical readings of the Qur'an that are associated with Sufism.

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63 To further illustrate materially where I and others would access resources: In high school, I would order books from websites and bookstores in New York City, including the ICNA Bookstore in Jamaica Queens. I ordered *The Majestic Qur'an* from Alhambra Bookstore, associated with Zaytuna Institute in Hayward, CA, and other material by or recommended by the Zaytuna scholars such as Shaykh Hamza Yūsuf.

I also found some introductions to chapters by Mawdudi online when I was in high school. Some members of my MSA were more familiar with Mawdudi as their parents were part of Qur'an study circles where Mawdudi's works were discussed as a staple of the Jamaat Islam movement educational efforts. Some of my Muslim student peers were involved in the youth division of ICNA, called Young Muslims (YM), which would hold *halaqas* where some of Mawdudi's works were studied.

As a young adult, I was not aware of how influential Mawdudi was. But I now see that Mawdudi's activist, modernist commentary was there shaping a community of readers—for example, my father in Bangla or my father-in-law in its English version. The commentary of Mawdudi was widely read by the immigrant generation, who discussed the Qur'an's meanings in study circles, because they found him to be accessible and engaging, with modern knowledge and discoveries, rather than simply being a blind follower (or engaging in *taqlid*) of obscure exegetical madrasa texts whose relevance for contemporary society is not clear. Mawdudi's continued influence can be seen on the bookshelves of several mosques in the NYC area, which I have observed featuring both original works as well translations of his commentary. ICNA-affiliated Muslims have a strong preference for Mawdudi's commentary and feature his work as part of their study circles.[64]

I was not yet exposed to explicitly Sufi readings except through association with my teachers of the Fultuli order, and I did not know what a mystical reading was at that time. I was

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64 See, for example, the curriculum for the Bangladeshi American organization Muslim Ummah of North America (MUNA) or YM, both associated with Mawdudi's Jamaate Islami organization. The April 2014 MUNA Youth syllabus (https://muslimummah.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Syllabus-for-MUNA-Youth-April-2014.pdf) features the following works by Mawdudi: *Fundamentals of Islam*, *Let Us Be Muslims*, *Towards Understanding Islam*, *Introduction of Tafheem ul Qur'an*, and the entirety of *Tafheem al-Qur'an*, Mawdudi's exegetical work.

not familiar with the Sufi Qur'an commentators such as Qushayrī[65] or Ibn 'Ajība[66] until I got to Zaytuna. There, Shaykh Yahya Rhodus, a white American who had converted to Islam in 1998, studied briefly in Mauritania and Syria, and then studied most extensively with the Ba 'Alawis in Tarim, Yemen, valued Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an and introduced those texts to our study of tafsir. Imam Zaid Shakir, an African American who converted to Islam in 1977 and studied for seven years in Syria and Morocco, was my primary teacher at Zaytuna. He remarked that he had been searching for a copy of Qushayrī's tafsir in Damascus and was happy when we found a copy of this work in a bookstore in the Bay Area.[67] In studying tafsīr at Zaytuna, I was exposed to aspects of the scholastic 'aqlī (rationalist) and naqlī (transmission) approaches that I give an overview of in chapter one, as well as the Sufi mystical readings (*isharāt),* which contrasts with the narrower prism of both the Salafi and Islamists movements. Unfortunately, the present dissertation does not include a robust examination of a Sufi or mystical approach to Qur'anic exegesis, except for a brief overview of Imam Fode Drame's interpretation of the Joseph narrative.

Contemporary Muslim scholars and thinkers have varied in their approaches to the discipline of theology, which is sometimes referred to as *'aqīda* or *kalām.* These approaches range from an appreciation of the medieval theological schools (particularly the 'Asharī-Maturidī schools) to a rejection of this legacy as representing medieval deviation and an unnecessary

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[65] For a study on Qushayrī, see Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar: Abū ʾl-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[66] A sample from Ibn 'Ajība's Qur'anic commentary is now available in Ahmad ibn 'Ajībah, *A Thirteenth/Eighteenth Century Quranic Commentary on the Chapters of the All-Merciful, The Event, and Iron from The Immense Ocean: al-Baḥr al-madīd*, translated and annotated by Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk and Michael Abdurrahman Fitzgerald (Louisville, KY : Fons Vitae, 2009).

67 Fadak Books (fadakbooks.com) is owned by a Shī'ī Iraqī brother who completed his PhD in Islamic studies at Indiana University, writing on the philosopher Mulla Sadra, and currently teaches at Zaytuna College. See Eiyad Al-Kutubi, *Mulla Sadra and Eschatology: Evolution of Being* (London: Routledge, 2015).

influence of Greek philosophy. The former position has sometimes been categorized as traditionalist, while advocates of the latter position, the Salafis, see much at fault with the medieval tafsīr tradition, especially its engagement with kalām, which came from engagement with Greek philosophy and other categories that Salafis view as neither part of the original Arabian ethos in which the Qur'an was revealed nor part of the early Muslim community. Salafis argue for "going back" to a "pristine" understanding of the Qur'an, unmarred by these extra-Qur'anic interventions and discussions, though this idea of the "pristine" is filtered through their own modern lenses.

Contestations: Traditionalists Push Back against the Salafis

I provide this overview as anecdotal evidence of exposure to the scholarly tradition of Islam in the early 2000s that pushed back against the Salafi approach which largely disparaged the scholastic Islamic traditions as having "gone astray" and being plagued with "blameworthy innovations" (*bida')*. Although these examples do not specifically touch upon choice in a reading a text of tafsir, the broader contestations over whether following a historical school of thought in fiqh or aqidah or tasawwuf relate to the broader point about what kind of approach ("traditionalist" vs. Salafi especially) was seen by Muslims in my orbit as authoritative. Premodern works of exegesis were generally written by scholars who found the legal and theological schools or *madhabs* as authoritative institutions in which they situated themselves. This is in contrast with the modern Salafi approach, which contests the authority of these institutions or schools of thought.

When my older sister, who studied computer science at Hunter College, was introduced to a Syrian shaykh who used to teach in the MSA there, she purchased the book *Reliance of the Traveler*, which Shaykh Nuh Keller had translated which follows the Shafi'i madhab. The study of a classical fiqh text that adheres to one of the four Sunni madhhabs or schools of thought needs to be contextualized in the wake of the Salafi movement's prominence in advocating against

practicing Islam through a particular legal school of thought. In general, the Sunni world recognizes four major madhhabs: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, and Hanbali. A Sunni "traditionalist" position emerged to push back against the claims of the modern Salafi movement. Contrary to the Salafis, who argued against needing a madhhab in fiqh and following the kalām-based theological schools and *tasawwuf* or Islamic spirituality, traditionalists advocated all three: namely, following a madhhab in fiqh, following the kalām-based theological schools of Ash'arism and Maturidism, and acknowledging the praiseworthiness of Sufi teachings, though not necessarily through a particular Sufi *ṭarīqa* or path. In the Western British context, Sadek Hamid does an excellent job of contextualizing these debates among Islamists, Salafis, and Sufis.[68]

In high school, I read articles on masud.co.uk by Shaykh Nuh Keller, who argued that Salafi scholars like Ibn Baz and Uthaymin do not have proper teaching licenses or *ijazas*. Keller penned articles such as "What Is a Madhhab? Why Is It Necessary to Follow One?" and "Why Does One Have to Follow a Madhhab?" wherein he cites the late Syrian scholar of Kurdish origin, Ramadan al-Buti (1929-2013),[69] to argue for the necessity and wisdom of adhering to a madhhab. Answering the question, "Would you advise individuals to study hadith from al-Bukhari and Muslim on their own?" Keller warns of the dangers of autodidactic approaches to Islamic learning as opposed to studying with certified authorities with proper licenses (ijazas). Similarly, Abdal Hakim Murad (TJ Winter), the British convert to Islam, authored the article "Understanding the Four Madhhabs: The Problem with Anti-Madhhabism." Both Keller and Murad cite the Syrian

68 Sadek Hamid, *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

69 For a detailed study of Buti, see Jawad Anwar Qureshi, *Sunni Tradition in an Age of Revival and Reform: Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929–2013) and His Interlocutors.* 2019. University of Chicago Divinity School, PhD dissertation.

scholar Ramadan al-Buti and his work *La madhabiyya*, which has been translated into English, which gives a window into some of the contemporary debates in the Anglophone Muslim community today.[70] Buti argues that advocating no madhhabs is the biggest *bida'* or innovation; this argument plays on Salafis' obsession with innovations, which they generally condemn. Buti is arguing especially against another contemporary figure, Albani (d. 1999). The works of Albani, particularly his most famous work, *Pray as the Prophet Prayed*, argue that hadith are sufficient to provide the most authoritative positions on any religious matter, especially on how to pray, and that the historical differences of the Imams or scholars of the madhhabs should be disregarded.

The "traditionalist" movement, which included Western converts to Islam such as Nuh Keller, Abdal Hakim Murad, Hamza Yūsuf, Zaid Shakir, and Umar F. Abd-Allah, sought to push back against this Salafi position and advocate for the value of studying Islam through the framework and texts of the classical schools of thought. Deobandis and Barlevis of the South Asian context also advocate for a madhhab, particularly the Hanafi madhhab, though they differ among themselves over certain devotional and creedal issues, often leading to vicious polemics.[71]

In general, this "traditionalist" strand articulates an appreciation for the rich scholarly traditions of premodern Islam. Garrett Davidson characterizes this strand as experiencing a "resurgence" in the late 1990s by Muslims who perceived "reformist modes of Islam" to be unstable. "Proponents of the late Sunni scholarly tradition argued that their brand of Islam, with taqlīd, ṭarīqa Sufism, and Ash'ari scholastic theology, provided an alternative to the chaos of reformer ijtihād, the spiritual bankruptcy of political Islam, and constant anathema (*takfīr*) of Salafi

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70 Ramadan al-Buti, *Al-La Madhhabiyya (Why Abandoning The School Of Law Is The Most Dangrous Innovation Threatening The Sacred Law),* (n.p.: Sunni Publications, 2017).

71 For a study of the Deobandi-Barlevi contestation, see SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muḥammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

theology." This movement found a receptive audience and following by the turn of the twenty-first century. The Qur'anic commentaries that this trend would esteem include the classics or "core of the pre-modern madrasa curriculum—al-Rāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, and the supercommentaries on those."[72]

A book that was particularly influential for me in sorting through the various orientations or trends and shaping my thinking was a polemic written by Aftab Ahmad Malik entitled *The Broken Chain: Reflections upon the Neglect of a Tradition*. This work argues for the importance of *isnads*, chains of transmission from student to teacher, and ijazas (permission to teach, licenses from *shuyukh*). He argues that in modernity, "reformers" and "modernists," such as the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and Salafis and Ikhwanis, have much to be faulted for in their transformation or "disfigurement" of the rich, "classical" Islamic traditions. The claims of Malik, I now realize, were a polemic for "traditional Islam," which was claimed to be passed down unchanged. I recognize this as a construction: claims to authority and selective readings of "the tradition" are always made by practitioners or "custodians" of the tradition. Yet, as critical observers, we should be careful to not freeze the 'traditionalists' or *ulema*, even as they claim to merely be 'replicating' and 'transmitting' the 'Tradition,' recognizing their own specific historical situations.

The twentieth century saw many attempts to address the needs of the age, including through the education of a new type of scholar. This "new kind of 'alim . . . would replace traditional sheikhs—the latter [being perceived as] . . . 'completely out of touch with the problems of the

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72 It is interesting to note that even in the premodern period, especially by the figures of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr, and Suytuti, there was pushback against the kalām approach of tafsīr, instead prioritizing or centering transmission-based or hadith-based tafsīr. The fifteenth-century Egyptian Suytui (d. 1505) "famously dismissed the philosophically oriented tafsīr of Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzī, a thirteenth-century Persian, as having 'everything [in it] except tafsīr.'"

modern Muslim society.'" Admirers of these initiatives viewed them as inspiring a "renaissance of knowledge," described as a:

> revivalist movement focusing on the encouragement of religious observance through new modes of preaching. The most prominent sheikhs of that period were thus first and foremost educators and leaders of men, the founders of institutions and jama'at, informal structures modelled on Sufi brotherhoods and inspired by a collective and organized project of social transformation—in other words, of social movements.[73]

A critical observer must pay attention to what specifically—which parts of a vast set of traditions—gets selected while appealing perhaps deceptively simplistically to "tradition." Tradition, as Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, is an argument across time between interlocutors who have common references through which these arguments are made coherent. Talal Asad highlights the relationship between past, present, and future in the negotiation of tradition through a Foucauldian notion of discourses to arrive at what current practitioners deem to be the best or correct practice. Asad writes, "For even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has gone before, it will be the practitioners' concepts of what is apt performance, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form."[74]

When contemporary believers read religious literature, they try to make the text more relevant or meaningful to their context. Premodern interpreters were also reading into the texts they offered commentary on. For this project, I provide concrete demonstrations of how Muslims

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73 Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 61.
74 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers Series* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center for Contemporary Studies, 1986), 14–15.

are engaging with the Qur'anic text, especially through the mediums of commentaries, particularly in the last fifty to seventy years in the North American and Western or Anglophone contexts. Even while acknowledging linguistically rooted meanings that can be cited from early sources, contemporary commentators, unsurprisingly, have their own set of concerns that they would like their interpretation of scripture to speak to. Key factors in the profound impact these contemporary commentaries have had on modern Muslims include the publication of print works meant for a general mass audience and the ability to disseminate such texts widely in society, even as the scholarly authority and credentials of the authors were contested by the traditional custodians of tradition.

Mawdudi, Asad, and the contemporary abridgment of Ibn Kathīr by Mubarakpūrī all engage in the work of molding tradition to answer contemporary questions, concerns, and needs. Even a translation of a classic work is abridged and sifted with particular concern for what is authentic and relevant from the original fourteenth-century work for twentieth-first-century readers. Traditionalists, including those appreciative of Sufis and kalām-based traditions, can be seen as chiefly arguing against Salafists' calls to direct engagement with the Qur'an and hadith. They instead emphasize the intellectual scholarship that developed after the Prophet's time through the contemporary period. The emphasis is usually on the "classical" period, with figures like Ghazālī seen as central. Recent academic work draws our attention to the "postclassical" scholastic tradition and argues that there were both contributions and drawbacks to the scholarly culture or system of ijazas and isnads.[75]

75 See Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

The Three Commentaries

I have chosen to present three texts, which I argue represent some of the most influential approaches to the Qur'an and its commentaries in contemporary American Islam. The first is the English translation of the Urdu *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, translated as *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, by the Indian Pakistani Abu'l ʻAla al-Mawdudi (1903–1979). This work can be categorized as apologetic, as directed toward a new educated elite class of Muslims who value the author's attempt to relate the Qur'anic text to modern discoveries in archaeology, biblical studies, modern science, and history. The author is explicitly concerned about the postcolonial conditions in which Muslims must build what he sees as truly Islamic states through character formation, moral fashioning of the self, but also through organized politics, taking inspiration from the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Companions and Islamic history more broadly. This modernist movement–oriented, postcolonial, relevance-seeking, apologetic approach confronts questions of nation and community building and asserts the centrality of Islam to the modern polity in the wake of secular approaches that sought to divide the proper realms of religion and state.[76] In Mawdudi, we see particular investment in arguing how Islam and the Qur'an hold up to the discoveries of modern knowledge, archaeology, and encyclopedias. He is part of the broader movement in a dialectical relationship with Christian missionaries. He also translates Sufi

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76 Despite the importance of Sayyid Qutb, in recognition of the copious works that have examined his life and commentary from various angles, but also in centering my own Bengali-Indian community, where Mawdudi has been much more influential than Qutb, I focus here on Mawdudi as the Islamist/*haraki* thinker. Mawdudi was also a major influence on Qutb. For some studies on Qutb, see Badmas 'Lanre Yūsuf, *Sayyid Qutb: A study of his tafsir,* (Selangor, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2009); Marco Demichelis, "Was Egyptian Islamic Revivalism really Counter-Hegemonic? Sayyid Qutb and the Problem of Islamic Occidentalism," *ReOrient*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Autumn 2019), 47--72; Ronald Nettler, "A Modern Islamic Confession of Faith and Conception of Religion: Sayyid Qutb's Introduction to the Tafsir, fi Zilal al-Qur'an," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1994), 102--114.

teachings into a modern form for *tarbiyya* (Islamic character) for modern audiences and members of his Jamaat-e-Islami organization. In trying to appeal to modern-educated Muslims, Mawdudi argues that the Qur'an is still relevant and that it speaks to their concerns in a postcolonial context. Mawdudi spends considerable time connecting specific doctrines and laws mentioned in the Qur'an to specific moments in the life of the Prophet and early Muslim community. Given his attention to historical development, it is not surprising that he argues that some aspects of the Qur'an's injunctions are not meant to be applied literally today; rather, Muslims must ask what the lesson and modern application of a specific historical injunction is.

The second text is an original work in English called *The Message of the Qur'an*, authored by the Austrian Jewish convert to Islam Leopold Weiss, or Muhammad Asad (1900–1992). Asad was initially supported by Saudi backers, but they withdrew their funding and support once the first volume of his commentary came out due to theological differences and what was deemed to be authoritative or heretical. Representing a modernist-rationalist trend, Asad draws heavily from the *'aqli* or intellectual/rational-oriented Qur'anic commentaries of the "classical period" such as Zamakhshari, Rāzī, and Baydawi, which are associated with the kalām-based Mu'tazilī and 'Ash'arī schools. Asad also draws from the early twentieth-century Azhari reformer Muhammad 'Abduh and his attempt at producing a modern Qur'anic commentary. Asad is a fan of Muhammad 'Abduh, who was well versed in the kalām tradition.[77] The fact that Asad lost the support and patronage of his Saudi backers indicates larger trends within contemporary Islamic thought, as Salafism became dominant. Asad's approach centers the *'aql* or intellect and is especially steeped

77 Contrary to portrayals of Abduh as simply borrowing from European sources to argue for a rational Islamic theology, further research shows that 'Abduh's rationalism can be seen much in harmony with the postclassical kalām scholastic tradition, which Afghani revives in Abduh with bringing the *ishraqi* Persian traditions.

in the traditions of kalām, particularly as they emerged from the Mut'azili, 'Ash'ari, and Maturidi debates and stances in the third Islamic century / ninth century CE *al-tafsīr al-ma'qūl*. 'Ash'ari thought was formed in conversation with Mu'tazili approaches, but in the contemporary Sunni religious world it has largely become marginalized. Muhammad Asad is particularly noteworthy for keeping that *kalāmi* or rationalist tradition toward tafsir alive in the English language.

Asad's commentary on the Qur'an became contested by the growth of the Salafi or hadith-based approaches in the late 1990s, as represented by the growing popularity of the Ibn Kathīr text. One fascinating question is where to locate Muhammad Asad in relation to these commentaries. Initially I wanted to label him as a modernist-rationalist and see his writings as more indicative of his modern European upbringing and education, including some tutoring in Jewish studies, before his wide travels and conversion to Islam. That framing would set up Asad as embodying a rupture with the premodern tradition. Further investigation into his work pushed me to appreciate the extent to which Asad draws on premodern classical works, especially those based in the kalām tradition of tafsir, such as Rāzī, Zamakhshari, and Baydawi. Asad also references medieval giants such as the hadith-based polymath Suytui (d. 1505). Asad might be best characterized as Sherman Jackson's typology of "Modernized Islam" or classical Islam made to fit and recalibrated to address modern issues.[78]

The third major text is the Darussalam (Riyadh-based) English publication of an abridgment by the Indian scholar Saif al-Rahman Mubarakpūrī (1942–2006) of Ibn Kathīr's (1300–1373) Qur'anic commentary, which represents a *naqli* (transmission-based) and Salafi trend. This text omits much of the original text by Ibn Kathīr, including the biblical material that

78 Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86–91.

Ibn Kathīr saw fit to include to provide background to some of the Qur'anic material. Modern-day Salafis and other Muslims are uncomfortable with using that material and opt for very stringent criteria for authenticity in what they accept as valid transmitted narrations. This forces them to exclude much of the inherited commentary tradition and broader Islamicate literature around the Qur'anic narratives. In comparison with the 'aqli trend, this approach centers the naqli, or transmission, especially of hadith, according to rigorous standards of authentication. This trend is sometimes called *al-tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr.* This type of hadith-centering approach is prominent in major influential trends in contemporary Islam, such as those of the Deobandi and Salafi persuasion and has resulted in the popularity of Ibn Kathīr's tafsir as the chosen text for study, giving rise to several modern abridged versions.[79] It must be stressed that what becomes popularized by publishing houses in Arabic and what comes into English are not the original Ibn Kathīr in his fullness but rather Ibn Kathīr in his abridged Salafi iteration.[80]

In summary, we find in the approaches of Mawdudi and Asad a common motif: Muslims in the formative and classical periods were dynamic and embraced the use of reason, but this attitude became neglected at a certain period, resulting in stagnation. Part of this embrace and emphasis on reason and rationality in the modern period may be understood by the broader

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79 In the future, I hope to compare these abridged versions for the differences in what they choose to keep and leave out.

80 This is partially due to the growing advocacy for the positions of Ibn Taymiyya toward tafsīr and the rise in popularity and wide dissemination of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr, which summarizes Tabari's hadith/narration-based approach to tafsīr. As Walid Saleh notes, Tabari also inherited the linguistic investigations that existed or were widespread before his own work became widely accepted as authoritative. But by Suyuti's (d. 1505) time, and certainly in the modern period, the naqli, hadith-based approach dominated over other approaches. Walid Saleh is also particularly insightful in his article about marginalia, drawing from a little-known (at least in the Western academy) text on the history of tafsīr by the late Tunisian scholar Ibn 'Ashūr (d. 1973) which argues for an alternative periodization of the important works of tafsīr than the one that became popular by Western Islamicists who accepted the narrative offered by the contemporary Azhari, Muhammad al-Dhahabi, in his work *al-Tafsīr wa'l mufassirūn*.

transformations in society and knowledge whereby, as Charles Taylor notes, there is "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[81] In this context, contemporary Muslim scholars are pressured to articulate their religious claims and beliefs in a way that is grounded in and backed by the epistemologies of logic and rationality to avoid accusations of "superstition," "ungrounded fancies," and "fairy tales," common charges against religious believers.

81 Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

Chapter 1: A Brief Overview of Approaches to *Tafsīr* in Relation to Three Commentators on the Qur'an

Historical approaches to Qur'anic exegesis can be divided into *'aqlī* (rational, intellectual) and *naqlī* (transmitted). The authority of the rational *kalām*-based approach gets challenged in the modern era through the revival, printing and dissemination of the approach of scholars like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr through translations, abridgments, and reprints. The chapter concludes by examining the postcolonial modern activist mold of Qur'anic commentaries, as exemplified by Mawdudi. Although Mut'azilī works have been highly influential in especially Shī'ī circles, the following does not contain a full account of Shī'ī and mystical or Sufi approaches to Qur'anic commentaries, which have been studied elsewhere.[1]

1 For a study of a Shī'ī tafsīr, see Bruce Fudge's work on the twelfth century Tabarsī, *Qur'ānic Hermeneutics: Al-Ṭabrisī and the Craft of Commentary* (London: Routledge, 2011). For a very brief overview of Shī'ī works, see Helmut Gātje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. from the German by Alford T. Welch (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), 38–40; for mystical works, see 40–41. For Sufi approaches, see Kristin Zahra Sands, *Ṣūfī Commentaries on the Qurʾān in Classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006). See also Gerhard Bowering, "The Light Verse: Qurʾānic Text and Ṣūfī Interpretation," *Oriens* 36 (2001): 113–144; Hugh Talat Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qurʾānic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model for Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013); Farhana Mayer, *Spiritual Gems: The Mystical Qur'ān Commentary Ascribed to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq as Contained in Sulamī's Ḥaqāʾiq al-Tafsīr from the Text of Paul Nwyia* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011); a translation of selections from the ninth-century Sufi Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. and annotated with an introduction by Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011); Martin Nguyen, *Sufi Master and Qur'an Scholar: Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and the Laṭāʾif al-Ishārāt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Annabel Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics: The Qurʾān Commentary of Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2006); Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad Ibn 'Ajība, *The Immense Ocean: Al-Baḥr al-Madid: A Thirteenth/Eighteenth Century Qurʾānic Commentary on the Chapters of the All-Merciful, the Event, and Iron*, trans. Mohamed Fouad Aresmouk and Michael Abdurrahman Fitzgerald (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2009); and Pieter Coppens, *Seeing God in Sufi Qur'an Commentaries: Crossings between This World and the Otherworld* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), and "Sufi Qurʾān Commentaries, Genealogy and Originality: Universal Mercy as a Case Study," *Journal of Sufi Studies* 7, no. 1 (2018): 102–124.

An abridged version of Ibn Kathīr's Qur'anic exegesis in translation has become an important source for contemporary American Muslims. I would like to situate this within its discursive environment. Many debates emerged in the modern period for Muslims, and "Qur'anic interpretive discourse was the umbrella that was employed to give all these efforts at rethinking the tradition in line with modern Muslims' concerns a much-needed authority."[2] A contestation is underway in the modern period, when medieval works are being translated and abridged for contemporary audiences. These medieval works were written in scholastic contexts, almost always for madrasa graduates with technical vocabulary who were engaged in theological debates very different from those that preoccupy contemporary Muslims. No wonder, then, that contemporary Muslims may struggle with Qur'anic interpretation as they try to make selections and find their choices to be relevant to them meaningfully and their social worlds. All three commentaries that I study in this dissertation can be viewed in this light of *tafsīr*: written for a new purpose, for a new audience. Mawdudi exemplifies direct instruction for contemporary Muslims. Mawdudi also is sympathetic to Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the Muslim scholastic embrace of Greek rationalism which they both see as foreign to the spirit of the Qur'an in its original context. Asad tries to highlight the modern rational appeal of the Qur'an's message, as exemplified in his dedication of his work: "for a people who think" (*li qawm yatafakirun)*. The abridged version of Ibn Kathīr is most directly tied with a medieval work; however, it too displays several significant changes that are in line with the modern Salafi movement's concerns.

2 Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 695.

Ibn Kathīr in its modern abridged printing exemplifies the narrowing of what is deemed acceptable and authoritative for Qur'anic exegesis. I begin by presenting an examination of Ibn Kathīr and his teacher, Ibn Taymiyya, and their approach to Qur'anic exegesis, and the rise of their popularity in the modern period. I then present an overview of two major approaches to Qur'anic exegesis. One of these two approaches, the rational approach, is one which Asad prominently draws from, and the transmitted approach is exemplified in Ibn Kathīr. Mawdudi exhibits the least concern with drawing from classical works since he is preoccupied with making the Qur'an speak to modern audiences, without much regard for veneration of the scholastic tradition.

Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn Kathīr's Approaches to Tafsīr

'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr was born in 1301 outside Damascus to a scholarly family during the Bahrī Mamluk dynasty (1250–1382). He was a notable hadith scholar and Shafi' jurist, Qur'anic exegete and historian. In Damascus, he studied with several notable hadith scholars who were associates of the polymath Ibn Taymiyya[3] (d. 1328), especially al-Mizzī (d. 1341) and al-Dhahabī (d. 1348). He also shared a very close bond with Ibn Taymiyya's most important student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350).[4] These scholars concentrated on hadith sciences and were opposed to the rationalist orientation of kalām, especially of the 'Ash'arī school.[5] Ibn Kathīr

3 For an accessible primer to Ibn Taymiyya's life and works, see Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019). For a series of more specialized studies, see Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2010).

4 For one study on the theological approach of this influential scholar and disciple of Ibn Taymiyya, see Miriam Ovadia, *Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and the Divine Attributes: Rationalized Traditionalistic Theology* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018).

5 Younus Y. Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād al-Dīn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson, (Leiden: Brill, 2018-).

married al-Mizzī's daughter Zaynab and taught hadith at Madrasa Umm Sāliḥ in Damascus, where al-Dhahabī used to teach. Ibn Kathīr also taught tafsīr at the central Umayyad Mosque, which was well attended and highly regarded.[6] He served as the khaṭīb or person who delivers the Friday sermons from 1345.[7] His legal opinions or fatwas were sought after by scholars and government officials. His works emphasized hadith and his "major works attempted to make the Shāfiʿī *madhhab* more *ḥadīth*-based by building on other Shāfiʿī traditionalists."[8] Even his biographical dictionary of scholars of the Shāfī' madhhab sought to emphasize hadith over kalām, in contrast with, for example, the Shāfī biographical dictionary by his contemporary Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 1370), who was Ash'arī. Ibn Kathīr authored works in history, hadith sciences, Shāf'ī *fiqh*, and most importantly for our purposes, Qur'anic exegesis. He died in February 1373 and was buried next to his teachers al-Mizzī and Ibn Taymiyya in the Ṣūfiyya cemetary in Damascus.

Ibn Kathīr, as a noted hadith scholar, took previous hadith-based tafsīrs, especially those by al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 938),[9] and evaluated the hadiths in those collections for their authenticity according to rigorous hadith standards. As Mirza notes, "Ibn Kathīr sought to produce a more ḥadīth-based tafsīr rather than the speculative one of al-Rāzī."[10]

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6 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād al-Dīn."
7 H. Laoust, "Ibn Kat͟hīr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

8 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, 'Imād al-Dīn."

9 This Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 938), who has a hadith-based tafsīr, is different from the aforementioned Fakr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who has an 'Ash'ārī kalām–based tafsīr, called *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (The Big Tafsīr), or *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen). It has been printed in thirty volumes.

10 Younus Y. Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd ed., ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_30853.

Much of Ibn Kathīr's Qur'anic commentary and universal history can be seen as a hadith- or transmission-based sifting of the ninth-century exegete Ṭabarī.[11] Some scholars even credit Ibn Taymiyya, who greatly influenced, for "resuscitating" Ṭabarī's tafsīr after it had "fallen into oblivion."[12] Both Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr's Qur'anic exegetical works are works of ḥadith transmission and commentary—in other words, naqlī focused.[13]

Ibn Taymiyya[14] vehemently argued against what he saw as unwarranted speculative reasoning in interpreting the Qur'an, which he believed was widespread in the kalām approach to tafsīr, instead of relying on authentic hadith transmission or employing the naqlī (transmitted)

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11 For a brief study on Ṭabari's life and his approach in his Qur'anic commentary, see Bruce Lawrence, "Abu Ja'far al-Ṭabarī: Sunni Historian and Qur'anic Exegete," in *The Qur'an: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 83–96. See also Mustafa Shah, "Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of Tafsīr: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15, no. 2: 83–139.

12 Ulrika Martensson, "Early Medieval Tafsīr," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 660. Furthermore, one notices in the Darussalam abridged translation of Ibn Kathīr that the majority of references provided in the footnotes are actually to Ṭabarī, in addition to occasional references to the hadith works of the Cairo-based hadith scholar of the Mamluk period, Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī*, the famous commentary on the hadith collection of al-BukhārīFor a brief study on this hadith scholar, see Kevin Jaques, *Ibn Hajar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Joel Blecher, "Ḥadīth Commentary in the Presence of Students, Patrons, and Rivals: Ibn Ḥajar and Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī in Mamluk Cairo," *Oriens* 41, no. 3/4 (2013): 261–287.

13 Despite this overview of how a transmission-based approach to tafsīr was advocated by these two scholars, we ought to be careful not to overgeneralize or universalize from these examples to thinking that the whole of the tafsīr tradition shifted from polyvalence to monovalent readings, or collectively became less accepting of ambiguity, due to the increasing primacy of the transmitted-based approach. Pieter Coppens makes a compelling argument for this position in "Did Modernity End Polyvalence? Some Observations on Tolerance for Ambiguity in Sunni Tafsīr," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 56. He argues against the positions of Thomas Bauer and Shahab Ahmed.

14 For studies on Ibn Taymiyya, see Frank Griffel, "Ibn Taymiyya and His Ash'arite Opponents on Reason and Revelation: Similarities, Differences, and a Vicious Circle," *The Muslim World,* vol. 108 (January 2018), 11—39; Elliott A. Bazzano, "Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part I: Scholarly Perceptions," *Religion Compass* 9/4 (2015): 100–116 and Bazzano, "Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part 2: Intellectual Contributions," *Religion Compass* 9/4 (2015): 117–139.

approach in a rigid manner.[15] Younus Mirza, a scholar who has studied Ibn Kathīr, notes that while sometimes the influence of Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Kathīr has been overstated, Ibn Kathīr "was certainly attracted to the scholar [Ibn Taymiyya] and became one of his biggest advocates."[16] Ibn Kathīr studied with Ibn Taymiyya, even while the latter was being attacked by other scholars in Damascus. These attacks led to Ibn Taymiyya's trial and imprisonment.[17]

Ibn Kathīr followed the lead of his teacher in emphasizing the naqlī approach to Qur'anic exegesis as the most authoritative approach. Ibn Kathīr incorporated what tafsīr scholar Walid Saleh calls Ibn Taymiyya's "radical hermeneutics" into his own exegetical work. This hermeneutical approach argues for prioritizing interpretation of the Qur'an through other Qur'anic verses and then the statements of the Prophet, Companions, and Successors. As Saleh argues, by advocating a respect for only these early generations and not the subsequent scholars or doctrines or practice, Ibn Taymiyya (and, by extension, Ibn Kathīr) advocated a type of "iconoclasm" whereby "he was free to escape the binding authority of any other figure in subsequent Islamic intellectual history, no matter how highly regarded such a figure might be amongst his contemporaries."[18] This was especially targeted toward the scholars who employed philology or

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15 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," in *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 198.
16 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn." Mirza explores the influence of Ibn Taymiyya on Ibn Kathīr in his article "Was Ibn Kathīr the 'Spokesperson' for Ibn Taymiyya? Jonah as a Prophet of Obedience," *Journal of Quranic Studies* 16 (2014): 1–19.

17 McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," 196. See Sherman A. Jackson, "Ibn Taymiyya on Trial in Damascus," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39, no. 1, (Spring 1994): 41–85. See also Hasan Qasim Murad, "Ibn Taymiya on Trial: A Narrative Account of His Miḥan," *Islamic Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 1–32 [published by Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad].

18 Walid A. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123.

kalām (speculative theological) methods in commenting on the Qur'anic text. Ibn Kathīr's Qur'anic commentary was the "first major commentary to put into practice the theory of Ibn Taymiyya (or at least attempt to do so)."[19] It did not, however, fully adhere to Ibn Taymiyya's theory. As Saleh argues,

> Ibn Kathīr was unable to break away fully from the established rules of the encyclopedic paradigm of tafsīr, and the work can only be described as a transitional work between the encyclopedic method and the new radical hermeneutical method. Despite the heavy emphasis on inherited interpretations Ibn Kathīr was still bound to the traditional method of philology, relying heavily as he did on al-Ṭabarī's insights and philological discussions. Ibn Kathīr was thus turning al-Ṭabarī into a figure of the salaf, which is hardly what Ibn Taymiyya would have wanted.[20]

Saleh undertakes a detailed study of Ibn Taymiyya's treatise, which I will refer interested readers to. As Jane Dammen McAuliffe notes, Ibn Kathīr "lets the primacy of *al-tafsīr bi-l-mathur*," or transmitted reports, "manifest itself in the overall orientation and achievement of his commentary." This prioritization of transmitted reports "separates Ibn Kathīr from many of his predecessors," as his approach "extrudes the exegetical accomplishments and accretions of the intervening centuries"[21]—in other words, Islamic intellectual traditions embodied in the discipline of kalām and exegetical developments of the tenth to thirteenth centuries CE.

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19 Saleh, 124.

20 Saleh, 153.

21 McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," 198. See also Calder's assessment of Ibn Kathīr in "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr."

Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr advocated an approach to tafsīr that highlights the hadith- or transmission-based (naqlī) reports from the Prophet or early generations of Muslims. These reports are valued and esteemed over what are seen as the (ʻaqlī) speculative reasonings and rationalizations of later scholars or exegetes, especially those associated with the theological school of Ash'arism and, more broadly, kalām, which Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr largely opposed. As one scholar notes, for Salafis, because "kalām is a science only developed after the days of the pious elders (al- salaf al- ṣāliḥ), which makes it warrant the label bidʿa from the Salafī viewpoint, in addition to its purported debt to (Greek) philosophy." Thus, for Salafis, "kalām is [to be] rejected as a whole."[22]

The Modern Rise to Popularity of Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn Kathīr's Tafsīr

In modern times, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr became Muslim household names, especially through the proliferation of the modern Salafi movement. Recent academic literature documents that certain ideas of Ibn Taymiyya found some reception in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries; however, he was a relatively marginal figure until the nineteenth century. As Khaled El-Rouayheb writes, "Ibn Taymiyya had very little influence on mainstream Sunni, non-Hanbali Islam until the nineteenth century."[23] In the twentieth century, there has been a remarkable uptake in interest in Ibn Taymiyya and his influence, both among committed Muslims and academics. As El-Rouayheb writes, "From a little-read scholar with problematic and controversial views, he [Ibn

22 Philipp Bruckmayr, "Salafī Challenge and Māturīdī Response: Contemporary Disputes over the Legitimacy of Māturīdī Kalām," *Die Welt des Islams* 60 (2020): 298.

23 See Khaled El-Rouayheb, "From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899): Changing View of Ibn Taymiyya among Non-Ḥanbalī Sunni Scholars," in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, ed. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2010), 269.

Taymiyya] was to become for many Sunnis of the modern age one of the central figures in the Islamic religious tradition."[24] Walid Salah cautions scholars from mistakenly back-projecting the influence and dominance of Ibn Taymiyya's approach onto premodern, medieval Islam. Ibn Taymiyya's (and Ibn Kathīr's) approaches were not "representative" but rather "revolutionary and innovative."[25]

Print culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as opposed to the previous manuscript culture, popularized texts like that of Kathīr that had previously been ignored. Before this point of transformation, Ahmed El Shamsy notes, a reform-minded individual such as the Indian scholar Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (1832–1890), during his pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in 1869, sought works in the holy cities by Ibn Taymiyya as well as Ibn Kathīr's exegesis but could not find them. As El Shamsy documents, "works that would become ubiquitous a century later were still out of reach at his time; such works including Ibn Kathīr's (d. 774/1373) Qur'anic exegesis, which Khān knew of but could not obtain, despite his connections and personal wealth."[26] This example underscores how difficult and rare it was for an interested Muslim scholar with resources to gain access to Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr. That work's widespread availability, including translation into English, illustrates just how much Muslim communities around the world underwent a major shift in the twentieth century toward considering specific Qur'anic exegetical works as authoritative.

24 El-Rouayheb, 305.

25 Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics," 153.

26 Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 174.

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw massive transformations in approaches to Qur'anic commentaries.[27] Walid Saleh underscores the radical shift and influence this approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics had, so much so that he speaks of it having a "triumph" in "the latter part of the 20th century. Ibn Taymiyya's treatise on approaches to tafsīr has now become the basis for how modern conservative Muslim intellectuals conceive of Qur'anic exegesis."[28] According to Johanna Pink, "before the eighteenth century, these scripturalist tendencies [associated with Ibn Taymiyya] had been a rather elitist endeavor, directed at other scholars and with a strong focus on hadith scholarship. They had not been tied to a vision of educating lay Muslims on the Qur'an."[29] This hadith-based or scripturalist approach advocated by Ibn Taymiyya, and partially incorporated into Ibn Kathīr's work, is now "pervasive among modern Muslim exegetes."[30] In the twentieth century, the popularity of the exegetical work of Ibn Kathīr virtually overtook the popularity of any other tafsīr in the modern world. As Mirza writes, "Ibn Kathīr's *Tafsīr* has arguably become his most important work, especially in modern times."[31] Noting this change of growing influence and widespread popularity of use in modern Islam, Mirza writes, "In modern times, his tafsīr has

27 "The last third of the nineteenth century was a time in which important changes occurred" in this field. Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today*, 14.

28 Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics," 125–126.

29 Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today*, 17. She highlights Indian scholar Shah Wali Allah Dihlawi (1703–1762) as centering the Qur'an in educating the Muslim masses, as well as Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) as having "diagnosed a widespread lack of Qur'anic education that, in his opinion, prevented both unity and reform" (see 17–19).

30 Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics," 154.

31 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn."

been transformed from an encyclopedic one to a madrasa tafsīr, or from a reference work to one that is used in university and seminary curriculums."[32]

Tracing the publications that led to this proliferation and dissemination of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr, we can note the influence of the modern Egyptian hadith scholar Aḥmad Shākir (1892–1958). Shākir published a critical edition and commentary on Ibn Kathīr's book on hadith sciences,[33] started a commentary on the hadith-based tafsīr of Ṭabarī, and an Arabic abridgment of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr with extensive notes, which played a role in raising its stature in Salafi circles to which he belonged and on which he was a strong influence.[34] The Syrian scholar Muḥammad al-Ṣābūnī (1930–2021)—previously based in universities in Saudi Arabia and later based in Istanbul—completed an abridgment of Ibn Kathīr that was published in Beirut in 1973, that is different from the abridgement by the Indian scholar Safi al-Rahman al-Mubarakpūrī. Mubarakpūrī headed a committee that edited this abridgment, published in ten volumes in Riyadh in 2003. The English translation I examine here is based on al-Mubarakpūrī's abridgment.

These various abridgments and publication of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr in the last fifty years have attempted to make the work "accessible to the average reader, and it quickly became a central text

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32 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn," citing Walid Saleh, *The formation of the classical tafsīr tradition : the Qur'ān commentary of al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035*) (Boston : Brill, 2004), 16.

33 al-Ba'ith al-Hadīth: Shakir's explanation of Ibn Kathīr's *Ikhtisaar 'Uloom al-Hadith*, which itself was an abridgment of the hadith master Ibn Salah's classic, *al-Muqaddimah*, in hadith criticism.

34 Both works were not completed by Shakir. For a brief introduction to Ahmad Shakir, see Ebrahim Moosa, "Shaykh Aḥmad Shākir and the Adoption of a Scientifically-Based Lunar Calendar," *Islamic Law and Society* 5, no. 1 (1998): 57–89. For a study of Shakir's position regarding "triple divorce in one instant" and his debate with another prominent Muslim scholar, see Samy Ayoub, "Casting Off Egyptian Ḥanafism: Sharīʿa, Divorce, and Legal Reform in 20th-Century Egypt," *Die Welt des Islams* 60, no. 4: 349–383. For an Arabic study of his scholarly life, see Rajab Ibn 'Abd al-Maqṣūd, *al-Ṣubḥ al-sāfir fī ḥayāt al-'Allāmah Aḥmad Shākir*, 1309–1377 (Kuwait: Maktabat Ibn Kathīr, 1994).

in the Arabic-Islamic world."[35] A contemporary Muslim American scholar, Furhan Zubairi, similarly observes that Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr, which has usually been printed in four volumes in Arabic (although there are editions with more extensive notes), "is perhaps the most famous, commonly read and studied tafsīr throughout the Muslim world."[36] As I have highlighted, this was not always the case but is rather a recent phenomenon.[37]

These developments are significant in marking the choice in the twentieth century to abridge and popularize Ibn Kathīr, both in Arabic and then subsequently in English translation, elevating this hadith- or "traditionalist"-based approach over alternative approaches, especially ones that are steeped in the kalām tradition. The kalām traditions, as I have noted, enjoyed preeminence in the premodern madrasa curriculum and Islamic scholarly circles. The rise of modern Salafism centers the hadith-based approach and is antagonistic to the rationalist approaches of kalām and philosophy that were previously widespread. The authority of the kalām-based approach gets challenged in the modern era, through the revival, printing, and dissemination of the approach of scholars like Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr, who argued against the kalām approach.

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35 Mirza, "Ibn Kathīr, ʿImād al-Dīn."

36 Furhan Zubairi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an* (n.p.: Institute of Knowledge, 2017), 57. "In his work he focused on narrations that explain the meanings, context and lessons of the verses. He explained the meanings in a way that is easy to read and understand."

37 It is interesting that the European Muslim Ahmad Von Denffer writes about Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr, "This book although of greatest importance to Muslims has been widely ignored by the orientalists. … See e.g. Gaetje, op. cit., who does not even mention Ibn Kathīr's name. Also Goldziher, I.: Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranslegung, Leiden, 1970, is silent about him." Ahmad Von Denffer, *'Ulūm al-Qur'ān: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'ān* (Leicestershire: The Islamic Foundation, 1994 [1983]), 136. This could be an entry into exploring the curious question of what do Western academics explore and write about, as opposed to what is important to Muslims at the time.

Saleh further points out that we can make better sense of the "scripturalism"[38] prevalent among many contemporary Muslims regarding their approach to Qur'anic exegesis by keeping track of the rising influence and embrace of Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn Kathīr's approach to tafsīr, which modern Islam—through the spread and influence of the Salafi movement and its publications—has brought to the forefront.[39]

The Salafi Influence and "Correction" of Ibn Kathīr's Tafsīr

Johanna Pink notes that the modern Salafi publication of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr should be seen as its own work; even as it borrows or draws from the authority of the fourteenth-century scholar, the contemporary authors and publishers have their own interests in circulating this work. Their positions are remarkably much narrower in terms of embracing a multiplicity of positions than the original's. As Pink notes, Ibn Kathīr is seen as the most authoritative, authentic hadith-based tafsīr, prized in Salafi circles. Yet sometimes contemporary Salafis also seek to "correct" Ibn Kathīr when he engages in some metaphorical interpretations of theological concepts such as "God's hand" as power, for example; they appeal to Ibn Taymiyya to take the position that such terms should be left as they appear in the Qur'anic text, without metaphorical interpretation, which they generally condemn.

Pink also notes that Muslims who might not be Salafi but are in search of a tafsīr work in a Muslim bookstore may end up getting Ibn Kathīr because it is one of the few complete works that are widely distributed and available. This again highlights the porous nature of the readers of texts

38 Saleh cites Daniel Brown, "The Triumph of Scripturalism: The Doctrine of Naskh and Its Modern Critics," in *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, ed. Earle H. Waugh (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 51.

39 Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics," 154.

and their identities that go into forming the stances of contemporary Muslims and gestures toward the patronage and book choices that inform which texts are widely distributed over others that for various reasons stay untranslated or do not circulate as well or gain authority or credibility. Ibn Kathīr, who was a Shafi'ī scholar, recognized valid differences of opinion between legal schools (*madhhabs*). However, one of the ways in which reductionism occurs in the abridged translation of Ibn Kathīr is that those differences get excluded in favor of only one "correct" position. This is reflective of Albani's approach to legal (*fiqh*) differences, whereby he condemns the authority of the madhhabs and argues for "directly extracting" from the "Qur'an and Sunnah."[40]

With regard to the Qur'an, Pink documents how from the 1920s onward, Saudi Arabia "invested in printing activities and contributed massively to the popularization of what the Saudi scholars considered to be legitimate, i.e. ḥadīth-based hermeneutics and exegesis, for example Ibn Kathīr's and al-Baghawī's Qur'ān commentaries and Ibn Taymiyya's *al-Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr*."[41] The Saudi promotion especially of Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn Kathīr led to the increasing popularity of these two authors and their approaches to the Qur'an beginning in the twentieth century.

The Saudi-Based Darussalam Publishing House

Bruce Lawrence has drawn attention to the competition of various orientations in Qur'an translations and notes the construction of orthodoxy through the promotion of "Saudi-approved

[40] See the earlier mention of Albani on page 30.
41 Johanna Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'ān," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 777.

translations."[42] Critical to this venture is the Darussalam publishing house (Salafi oriented with office headquarters based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). The abridgment of Ibn Kathīr in ten volumes was first published in July 2000. The publishing house markets itself on the front cover as a "Global Leader in Islamic Books." As Martin Nguyen documents, "The Saudi publisher Dar us Salam is one of the major and most pervasive distributors to Muslim American communities."[43] He notes the competition among various publishing houses for shaping Muslim discourse:

> Each of these publishers is speaking to various segments of American Muslim communities, and oftentimes, the West at large, in different modes and invoking different forms of appeal. That is not to say these groups are contradictory or diametrically opposed to one another. Nevertheless, in competing for the same shelf space in mosque and home, they are in essence drawing from the same well, from the same limited pool of resources.[44]

With competing ideologies and projects at play, the self-limitation that these ideologies impose on what they deem to be authoritative is a major factor in what becomes widely disseminated in the American Muslim community. As I will expand on later, the Salafi trend is generally opposed to mystical and allegorical readings, and as a modern reformist movement, they also take issue with several other doctrines and practices that were prevalent in premodern Islam.

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42 Bruce Lawrence, *The Koran in English* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 131.

43 Martin Nguyen, "Hermeneutics as Translation: An Assessment of Islamic Translation Trends in America, *The Muslim World* (October 2008): 498.

44 Nguyen, 498.

Part of what motivates the modern, reforming Salafi publishing team is objection towards incorporating Isrā'īliyat or biblical material. The back cover of the book reads, "Darussalam is proud to present for the first time this abridged version of Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr, which is free from unauthentic Hadiths." Yet even as the Darussalam version explicitly seeks to expunge such elements, it is noteworthy that they still find their way into the work.

Let me note too that there is another abridgment, in Arabic, by the Syrian-born Muhammad Nasib al-Rifai (1915–1992).[45] This work, like the Darussalam version, strongly opposes the inclusion of Isra'iliyat. In the author's words, his abridgment "omitted completely the narrations from Jewish sources and also the ridiculous statements that the author quoted for the sake of information."[46] Two volumes of al-Rifai's abridgment were translated into English by 1999, before Darussalam in Riyadh took up the project of publishing a complete translation of Mubarakpūrī's abridgment.[47]

The exegetical work of Ibn Kathīr was abridged, as the cover page states, "by a group of scholars under the supervision of Shaykh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpūrī." Mubarakpūrī (1942–2006), an Indian scholar, completed his madrasa studies in northern India and then taught at Jamiah Salafiyah in Banaras, India, until 1988, whereupon he began working at a research institute

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45 Joas Wagemakers, "Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism," in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*, ed. P. R. Kumaraswamy (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 268. As Wagemakers notes, Al-Rifai joined other Salafi preachers in spreading the Salafi movement in Amman, Jordan.

46 Muhammad Nasib ar-Rifai, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (London: Al-Firdous, Ltd., 1996), cited in Jamaal al-Din Zarabozo, *How to Approach and Understand the Quran* (Boulder, CO: Al-Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 1999), 248.

47 The American Muslim Salafi scholar Jamal Zarabozo mentions all of this in his "Suggestions for Further Study" in his book *How to Approach and Understand the Quran.* Zarabozo, *How to Approach and Understand the Quran*, 247–248. Interestingly, Zarabozo recommends Mawdudi, the Salafi translation of the Qur'an by al-Hilali and Khan, the available volumes of Ibn Kathīr in abridged translation, and another contemporary work by Syed Iqbal Zaheer.

affiliated with the Islamic University of Medina.[48] He is most well-known for his popular *sirah* book, or biography of the Prophet Muhammad, known as *al-Rahīq al-Makhtūm (The Sealed Nectar),* which won the first-place prize granted by the Muslim World League in a competition for a Prophetic biography in 1979. Quite widespread in Islamic centers and bookstores, this work is also published by Darussalam. Mubarakpūrī also has a history of Mecca and Medina and notes and commentaries in Arabic on two hadith collections: a short collection of hadith dealing with legal matters and an abridgment of the canonical Sahih Muslim hadith collection.[49] The Arabic abridgment of Ibn Kathīr is entitled *al-Miṣbāḥ al-munīr fī tahdhīb Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (*The Illuminated Lamp in Abridging Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*).[50] The English project for translating the abridgment was supervised by Abdul Malik Mujahid.

Aqlī: Kalām-Based Works

By the thirteenth century CE, formidable intellectual and theological schools of thought and approaches were dominant in the learning centers of Islam. In this context, tafsīr "is a genre that at every historical moment was a vehicle for efforts to smooth over or resolve the major dilemmas of Islamic religious tradition."[51] The kalām-based tafsīrs are sometimes categorized as

48 See the autobiographical note at https://dar-us-salam.com/authors/safiur-rahaman.htm. He was the chief editor of a Salafi Urdu monthly magazine ("Muhaddith" associated with Jamiah Salafiyah) from 1980–1988.

49 Aḥmad ibn ʻAlī ibn Ḥajar al-ʻAsqalānī, *Bulūgh al-marām min adillat al-aḥkām maʻa taʻlīqah Itḥāf al-karām li-Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī* (Banāras: Idārah al-Buḥūth al-Islāmīyah wa-al-Daʻwah wa-al-Iftāʼ bi-al-Jāmiʻah al-Salafīyah, 1982) and Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ Abī al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim al-Qushayrī al-Nīsābūrī, *Minnat al-munʻim fī sharḥ Ṣaḥiḥ Muslim: al-musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-mukhtaṣar min al-sunan bi-naql al-ʻadl ʻan al-ʻadl ʻan Rasūl Allāh; al-shāriḥ Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī*, 4 vols. (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Salām; Dimashq: Dār al-Fayḥāʼ, 1999).

50 Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī, *al-Miṣbāḥ al-munīr fī tahdhīb Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzīʻ, 2000).

51 Walid A. Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis: The Golden Age of Tafsīr," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 669.

“interpretation based on individual reasoning,” (*al-tafsīr bi-l-ra’y*), and are seen in contrast to “interpretation based upon transmitted sources.” (*al-tafsīr bi-l-ma’thur)*, Alternatively, the former approach is called ‘aqlī, while the latter is called naqlī. I find it generally useful to divide the approaches to tafsīr into ‘aqlī and naqlī approaches. However, closer investigation will reveal that neither approach is completely divorced from the other.[52]

Kalām or speculative theology was central to the enterprise of medieval tafsīr. “A constant feature of [medieval] tafsīr,” Walid Saleh writes, was “the centrality in its discourse of kalām theology.”[53] The ‘Ash’āri theological school, dominant in most medieval Sunni contexts, was embodied in the prevalent exegetical works on the Qur’an in their time, such as those by Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), and Baydāwī (d. 1319).

Zamakhsharī’s work, which Rāzī and Bayḍāwī are both responding to, contains “a quintessence of Mu’tazilite doctrine.”[54] Zamakhsharī “brings to the text the characteristic theme of Mu’tazilite theology, for example, the doctrine of the unity and justness of God, the rejection of anthropomorphic concepts, the recognition of the intellect as the source of understanding of faith, and the advancement of freedom of will.”[55] According to another scholar, Zamakhsharī

52 For example, note how Tariq Jaffer categorizes Rāzī as “the first Sunnī theologian to develop a methodology that unified reason (‘aql) and the scriptural canon (naql), which included the Qur’ān and prophetic traditions.” Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of Qur’ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

53 Saleh, “Medieval Exegesis,” 673.

54 Gātje, *The Qur’ān and Its Exegesis*, 35. For a full study on Zamakhsharī, see Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Muʿtazilite Qurʾān Commentary: The Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

55 Gātje, *The Qur’ān and Its Exegesis*, 36.

"combines a meticulous concern for grammatical nicety with a defense of Mu'tazilī theology."[56] Bayḍāwī condensed Zamakhsharī's work and "has been considered the best [exegetical work] by the Sunnite theologians."[57] Rāzī's positions were often challenged by Ibn Taymiyya, who quipped that Rāzī's work "contained everything but tafsīr."[58] In contrast, Rāzī was considered "the high point of rational-theological Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr bi'l-ra'y)* by scholars of the Islamic scholarly tradition."[59] Rāzī and Bayḍāwī's works were influential in the postclassical period[60] until the modern period, when the naqlī approach in a modified version overtook the 'aqlī approach.

The 'aqlī (intellectual/rational) kalām tradition emphasizes logical deductions, the implications of language, and thoroughly absorbed Greek philosophy and thought for an attempt at a synthesis with Islamic revelation and transmitted knowledge.[61] This most dramatically manifested in the Mu'tazilī school, which the 'Ash'arīs and Maṭurīdīs were often responding to, in trying to find what they saw as the right balance between revelation and transmission (naql) and reason ('aql).[62] Even as the 'Ash'arīs and Maṭurīdīs were responding to Mut'azilīs, all three shared

56 Norman Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'ān*, ed. G. R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (London: Routledge, 1993), 103.

57 Gātje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis*, 37.

58 Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 7.

59 Tariq Jaffer, "Theological Commentaries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 775.

60 Jaffer, *Rāzī*, 2.

61 For a study of the importance of logic and reason in Islamic intellectual history see, John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam: the Caliphate of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

62 For Ibn Taymiyya's attempt at harmonizing reason and revelation, see Carl Sharif El-Tobgul, *Ibn Taymiyya on Reason and Revelation: A Study of Darʾ taʿāruḍ al-ʿaql wa-l-naql* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), and Yasir Kazi, "Reconciling Reason and Revelation in The Writings Of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): An Analytical Study of Ibn Taymiyya's *Darʾ al-taʿāruḍ,"* Yale PhD. Dissertation 2013.

theological doctrines or points of reference relating to the traditions of kalām, broadly speaking, in contrast to the ḥadīth transmission–based approach. The historical importance of the Mu'tazilī school to the development of the Islamic intellectual traditions cannot be underscored enough. As Qur'anic scholar Walid Saleh argues, "The Mu'tazilī tafsīr tradition has now to be seen as the central tradition, not as a peripheral phenomenon, as has thus far been the case" in the Western academy's historiography of tafsīr.[63]

Naqlī: Hadith Transmission–Based Works

The transmitted (naqlī) approach stands in contrast to the ʻaqlī-based approach. Ṭabarī (d. 923) stands out in this genre as "bringing together the entire breadth of the material of traditional exegesis extant in his time."[64] This act of compiling does *not* mean that for those operating in this transmitted genre "Muslim exegetes had no need to exert themselves intellectually" as some scholars have held. This perspective "completely ignores the intellectual endeavour involved not only in compiling the existing traditions and exegetical opinions … but also in making conscious selections."[65] Ṭabarī's work is characterized by strong disagreements with many Mu'tazilī views[66] and was also highly influential for his contemporaries from the Shī'ī tradition.[67]

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63 Saleh, "Medieval Exegesis," 670.

64 Gātje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis*, 34. How central and influential Ṭabarī was for the genre of tafsīr has been questioned by Saleh. See Walid Saleh, "Rereading al-Ṭabarī through al-Māturīdī: New Light on the Third Century Hijrī," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 2 (2016): 180–209.

65 Johanna Pink and Andreas Gorke, *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre*, ed. Andreas Gorke and Johanna Pink (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5.

66 Gātje, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis*, 35.

67 See Morteza Karimi Nia, "Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī and Shiʿa Tafsīrs," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 196–221.

Examining the contestation between theological schools at work in the pages of al-Ṭabarī, Saleh observes how “by pretending that this competing commentary tradition [of the Mu’tazilīs] did not exist, al-Ṭabarī presented Sunnism as the only (and thus necessary) voice that spoke for the meaning of the Qur’an.”[68] Saleh writes, “In this light, the *isnāds* [chains of transmissions or lists of narrators for a particular ḥadīth] in al-Ṭabarī’s exegesis appear a fetish-like device used to reconfigure *tafsīr* in the form of hadith.”[69] Saleh argues that al-Ṭabarī hadith-based Qur’anic commentary “was never the bedrock of the classical exegetical tradition” and that this proposition stands “contrary to the claims of the twentieth-century Salafī movement and modern Western scholarship alike.”[70] Ṭabarī’s exegetical work is nonetheless quite important, and Gātje argues against the idea that Sunnī exegetical activity should be seen as characterized by stagnation post-Ṭabarī.[71]

Shifts in the Modern Period

The ‘aqlī kalām tradition gets marginalized in the modern period by the naqlī transmitted tradition. As Barbara Metcalf and Ebrahim Moosa note, many contemporary Muslim educational institutions, such as those using the South Asian *dars nizamī* curriculum of the Deobandi madrasas (*dar al-‘ulūm*), have almost completely expunged the ‘aqlī disciplines and just emphasize the naqlī ones. This is epitomized by the final year in a Deobandi *‘alim* program, where one studies the six canonical works of hadith collections. This is also in line with the general Salafi objection to kalām

68 Saleh, “Medieval Exegesis,” 670.

69 Saleh, 670.

70 Saleh, 671.

71 Gātje, *The Qur’ān and Its Exegesis*, 35.

and its prizing of seeking the most rigorous standards in hadith authentication. The sciences of kalām and logic and poetry and literature (*adab*) were expunged from the curricula in many madrasas.

This shift from ʻaqlī to naqlī also manifests in the choice of tafsīr one studies and teaches. There has been a shift from using the standard madrasa textbook of Bayḍawī, which is kalām and ʻaqlī based, to the naqlī-focused Ibn Kathīr as the Qur'anic exegetical work one studies in tafsīr today. As Moosa writes, "Like the growing push-back against biblical lore in Qur'an exegesis with an exclusive focus on canonically approved exegesis, the emphasis on hadith studies too coincides with minimalizing the philosophical edge of the curriculum."[72] The broader demise of kalām is captured by Saleh, who writes, "*Kalām* has ceased to provide the language used to describe the world or to understand the Muslim's relationship to God. The most prevalent form of theological works (*ʻaqīda*, literature) is Wahhabi pamphlets and books, but these are markedly anti-*kalām* and anti-Ash'arī in method, style, and vocabulary."[73]

Major developments in the Qur'anic commentary genre in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to do not only with the "aims, methods, style and structure of *tafsīr* works" but also with "their audience, their authors and the media in which they are distributed."[74] For example, instead of glosses, which were used in the madrasa teaching context,[75] the book culture of newly

72 Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 120.

73 Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 694.

74 Pink and Gorke, *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, 5.

75 For an argument for the importance of glosses in *tafsīr* and broadly in Islamic intellectual history, see Walid Saleh, "Marginalia and Peripheries: A Tunisian Historian and the History of Qurʾanic Exegesis," *Numen* 58 (2011) 284–313. One of Saleh's main interventions in this article is to "to resituate the gloss, *al-ḥāshiya*, as integral

printed texts had a profound effect on how the texts were read and engaged with.[76] Due to these developments, *"tafsīr* has become the major bearer and means of negotiating the cultural tribulations of modernity and its transformative powers in the Islamic world."[77]

Some of these important discussions take place in English, especially as Qur'anic commentaries are translated and authored in that language,[78] and highlight the importance of the three works under study in this dissertation, which were either authored in English (Asad) or translated to English (Mawdudi and Ibn Kathīr). In the Turkish context, Brett Wilson observes that the twentieth century can be characterized as "changing times during which Islam and the Qur'an were reimagined simultaneously with the creation of a modern nation state."[79] We can note that a similar process was going on outside of Turkey in newly formed states such as Pakistan, which was Mawdudi's main arena of activity. However, Mawdudi and Muhammad Asad also had a global impact, especially through the many translations of their works for Muslim communities around the world. The wide availability of and accessibility to their works in print and on the Internet have led to their popularity in confessional Muslim settings.

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part of the history of tafsīr." Saleh identifies the gloss as "the chief blind spot" in accounts of the history of Qur'anic exegesis. Many modern Muslims contributed to this blind spot as they "saw in the gloss a degenerate form of scholarship and vigorously pretended (and still pretends) that such works were not only marginal to the history of Quranic exegesis but also intrinsically insignificant on their own." (286). Saleh identifies an exception to this blind spot in the twentieth century Tunisian exegete, Ibn 'Ashūr (1879-1970). See also Saleh's article on major glosses on Zamakhsharī's exegesis, "The Gloss as Intellectual History: The Ḥāshiyahs on al-Kashshāf," *Oriens* Vol. 41, No. 3/4 (2013), 217--259.

76 Coppens, "Did Modernity End Polyvalence?," 57.

77 Saleh, "Contemporary Tafsīr," 693.

78 Saleh, 702–703.

79 M. Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

Broadly speaking, the changed circumstances of modernity see the contestation that occurs when medieval works are translated and abridged for contemporary audiences. These medieval works were written in scholastic contexts, almost always for madrasa graduates with technical vocabulary and adherence to medieval theological schools of thought. No wonder, then, that contemporary Muslims may grapple with Qur'anic interpretation as they try to make selections and find their choices to be relevant—literally and figuratively speaking to them meaningfully in their contexts. Again, Wilson's observations from the Turkish context seem relevant: "By making the Qur'an accessible, supporters of translation and Qur'anic printing understood their efforts as attempts to challenge the traditional hierarchies of knowledge and provide a more direct way of communicating the central text of Islam."[80] Previously, this knowledge was almost solely within the purview of those scholarly authorities who typically studied in a madrasa. The modern period witnesses increased literacy, new institutions of dissemination, and the widespread proliferation of texts, especially Qur'anic commentaries, in the hands of those who would not be considered ulema yet adamantly lay claim to ownership of Islam based on scripture. Non-ulema increasingly participate in public discussions about the meaning and interpretation of the Qur'anic text.[81] The new audience for these publications is interested not in the mere replication or passing on of the authority of premodern Qur'anic interpretations but rather in an approach that offers spiritual guidance. In this context, "exegesis increasingly took on the style of a sermon, directly addressing

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80 Wilson, 8.

81 Wilson, 250.

its audience and, rather than explaining the text, taking it as a cue to illuminate issues in the contemporary believers' lives."[82]

As Johanna Pink writes, for both Qutb and Mawdudi, "the immediate relevance of the Qur'ān for contemporary Muslims is to be limited neither by previous interpretations nor by attempts to bring the Qur'an into line with modern ideas; conversely, the goal is to bring contemporary society into line with Qur'ānic ideals."[83] All three commentaries that I study in this dissertation can be viewed in this light of tafsīr written for a new purpose, for a new audience. Mawdudi exemplifies providing direct instruction for contemporary Muslims. As Pink writes, "Islamist Qur'anic commentaries do not usually reject the exegetical tradition outright. They use it wherever they find it helpful or convenient, but it is subordinate to other considerations."[84] Asad is engaged in trying to highlight the modern rational appeal of the Qur'an's message. The abridged version of Ibn Kathīr is most directly tied with a medieval work; however, as I have outlined, it too witnesses several significant changes that are in line with the modern Salafi movement's concerns. Certain ideas that were articulated in the medieval period, such as opposition toward incorporating biblical material, resurface in the modern period and become the dominant position in many Muslim circles.[85]

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82 Johanna Pink, "Modern and Contemporary Interpretation of the Qur'ān," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 485.
83 Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 182.

84 Pink, 184.

85 See Roberto Tottoli, "The Corpora of Isrāʾīliyyāt," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 682–692.

In South Asia, where Asad lived for many years and was active in the intellectual debates of the day, some of the kalām-based texts of the madrasas were criticized for not addressing the modern philosophical challenges facing Muslims. For example, the poet Altaf Hussain Hali (1837–1914), associated with the Aligarh movement of Sayyid Ahmad, critiqued the schools of Deobandis and Ahli-i Hadis for an overemphasis "on medieval rationalism, especially Greek learning and philosophy." The critique especially questioned the ability of the modern graduates of this education to be able to rationally argue for the truth of Islam or its Prophet or scripture. Others held that Greek philosophy was a defining challenge for classical Muslim theologians then, while today's age has its own challenges in the field of kalām and theology.[86]

It is in this context that a figure like Shibli Nomani (1857-1914), above all, genuinely sought to understand Western thought, a result of his close ties at Aligarh to Sayyid Ahmad and to Thomas Arnold. He attempted to work out a new theology, a new *'ilmu'l-kalām*, replacing the traditional *kalām* that had arisen in response to Greek thought with one more suited to the threats of the present. His work was widely attacked as heretical. In fact, despite the early rhetoric about providing both Eastern and Western learning, the 'ulama were deeply suspicious of the latter subject, and even English as a language was taught only briefly at the school.[87]

86 This position is espoused in an introspective assessment by a Deobandi scholar: Muhammadullah Khalili Qasim, *Madrasa Education: Its Strength and Weakness* (Mumbai: Markazul Ma'arif Education and Research Centre in association with Manak Publications, 2005), 115–116. The author draws from the prominent Deobandi scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani, *Hamara Talimi Nizam* (Karachi: Maktaba Darul Uloom, 2005).

87 Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 339.

The Pakistani scholar of Islamic studies Fazlur Rahman held that Islamic theological thinking bore the imprint of historical controversies and debates, which served as an impediment to addressing the philosophical challenges of the current era:

> For, the traditional formulation of Islam in terms of *kalām*-theology is no longer either fully intelligible to the modern mind nor, even if it is understood by abstract mental effort, quite meaningful in the modern situation. The truth is that this theology was developed under quite specific conditions and in response to definite and concrete religious and moral questions. It unmistakably bears the mark of history. The answer is, therefore, once again pushed back to an adequate presentation of Islam in terms that would be acceptable to and meaningful for a modern mind. In doing so some of the important emphases of our medieval theology will have to be changed or recast. It is only in this way that the eternal values and the basic religious experience of Islam may be resurrected from the weight of historical particularity under which they are submerged.[88]

Asad's approach, which emphasizes rationality, finds precedents and rational-oriented interpretations in the classical kalām works of Zamakhsharī, Rāzī, Bayḍāwī, and the modernist ʻAbduh, all of whom Asad quotes extensively. ʻAbduh's position resonates strongly with Asad's: As one scholar has put it, "In ʿAbdūh's opinion, the Qur'anic message is essentially rational, it does not require blind faith but rather encourages reasoning and reflection."[89] Asad, like ʻAbduh, has been labeled as neo-Mu'tazilī.[90]

However, in contrast with some "modernists" who see no use or value in these medieval kalām texts, ʻAbduh and Asad can be seen as valuing them for the foundation they provide while recognizing the need to build on their insights to address modern philosophical issues such as

88 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1979), 253–254.

89 Massimo Campanini, "Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*, ed. Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 854.

90 Campanini, 854.

atheism and materialism. In this context, Muhammad Asad represents an attempt to argue for the use of the ʻaqlī tradition of kalām-based tafsīrs. The kalām-based (rational) Qur'anic exegetical works came to the center, and it is Asad, among the three commentaries that I examine in this dissertation, who gives them recognition (manifested, for example, in his frequent reference to the medieval commentator al-Rāzī[91]). But both in Asad's time and afterward, his work became marginalized with the proliferation of the Salafi *daw'ah* in the 1990s, which moved naqlī- or hadith-transmission approaches to the center of Islamic intellectual traditions, including Qur'anic commentary or tafsīr.

Asad started his Qur'anic commentary project in 1960 while living in Geneva, Switzerland; in 1964 he resided in Tangier, Morocco. He published the work in Gibraltar in 1980.[92] King Faysal (r. 1964–1975) was a patron of this project after Asad reestablished relations with him in 1951 on his visit to Saudi Arabia.[93] The Muslim World League, formally established in 1962, subscribed in advance to Asad's commentary under the direction of King Faysal in 1963.[94] This is an early

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91 The contemporary Qur'an scholar and translator M. A. S. Abdel-Haleem considers Rāzī's Qur'an commentary to be "the single most important tafsīr." See his foreword to a recent translation of Rāzī's commentary on the first chapter of the Qur'ān: *Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, The Great Exegesis Al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 1, *The Fātiḥa*, trans. Sohaib Saeed (Cambridge, UK: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2018), ix.

92 Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'ān: Muhammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1: 88n3. Asad did spend significant time during his stay in Arabia in study in Medina, in addition to being at the court of Ibn Sa'ud in Riyadh. On the basis of these meetings and travels, Asad wrote favorably of the Sa'ud regime in German and Austrian periodicals, out of which he earned his livelihood. Martin Kramer, "The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 232, citing Asad, *Road to Mecca*, (London: M. Reinhardt, 1954), 48.

93 Asad was highly critical and expressive of his disappointment in Ibn Sa'ud's rule and the royal family's indulgence in luxury. However, as Kramer notes, later editions of *The Road to Mecca* toned down these criticisms (Kramer, 241, noting the difference between pages 177–181 of the original [1954] edition and pages 177–181 of the fourth edition [1980]).

94 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 241.

indication of the growing role Saudi Arabia would have in the patronage of Muslim education and institutions, such as the establishment of the University of Medina in the 1960s[95] and the publication and distribution of their choice of translations of the Qur'an and hadith collections. Asad published a partial translation of the first nine chapters of the Qur'an in 1964. Ten years later his work came under criticism for its modernist leanings and allegoric interpretations, leading to a ban in Saudi Arabia in 1974.[96] This meant the end of King Faysal's patronage. However, friends, including the Saudi minister of oil and natural resources, Ahmad Zakī al-Yamanī (1930–2021), to whom Asad dedicated his collection of essays, *This Law of Ours*, supported the completion of Asad's project.[97] From 1982, Asad lived in Sintra, Portugal and then southern Spain. In an unedited hour-long interview at his house in Granada in 1988, he recalls his encounters with political leaders, his travels, his journey to Islam, and his views on modern Muslim states.[98] There, Asad highlights his reformist message to Muslims who he believes have deviated from the ethical teachings and guidance that the Qur'an provides. He recalls his statement before formally

95 For a study of the finances and inner workings of the establishment of this university and the makeup of its teachers, see Michael Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital, and the Islamic University of Medina: A Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 2015): 701–721.
96 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242, citing Reinhard Schulze, "Islamischer Internationalismus im 20," *Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 334n59; Khalid Blankinship, *The Inimitable Qur'ān: Some Problems in English Translations of the Qur'ān with Reference to Rhetorical Features* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 24.

97 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

98 Leon, "Muhammad Asad Interview," YouTube, April 1, 2016, https://youtu.be/OuoRAImuF1M. Originally aired as "A Tribute to Muhammad Asad 1900–1992" for a Muslim broadcast channel called Islamic Information Service (IIS) Islam in 1992. It was hosted by a white American female Muslim named Nasiha Al-Sakina (her original name was Nancy Lydick), a psychologist at the National University in Los Angeles. From a conservative Christian family in Texas, she was "the only American woman to co-anchor an internationally televised show for Muslims." Sharon Whitley, "Close-up: The Lone Star of Islam," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1994, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-06-12-tm-3091-story.html.

converting to Islam when he said, "You Muslims are very strange people. You have the best ethical guidance possible in the Qur'an. You had the best guide in your Prophet Muhammad. How is it that you have abandoned the ways recommended in the Qur'an and by the Prophet and have fallen into such a decadence? Why are you acting in so many ways against the precepts of the Qur'an."[99] This trope of decadence invoked by Asad was a major point of concern for Muslims after losing political control to European powers, including in South Asia where Asad relocated to for a period.

Mawdudī's Qur'anic Exegesis

Although Mawdudi occasionally references the medieval work of Ibn Kathīr, he most exemplifies the writing of a new form of Qur'anic commentary meant for a broad audience of practicing Muslims in a new context of political subjugation or dominance by non-Muslim powers. Mawdudi argued that before a truly Islamic state could be established, "a concerted prior effort at training people in the proper Islamic norms" was needed.[100] Mawdudi used the medium available to him at the time—namely, writing for newspapers and magazine serials and publishing books—to disseminate his message and reach a wide audience, whom he wished to morally fashion.

Mawdudi's six-volume commentary on the Qur'ān, entitled *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, is among his most important claims to religious authority and a major influence on contemporary Muslims. Written in Urdu, it has been translated into multiple languages, including English, Bangla, Malay, and Turkish.[101] Mawdudi

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[99] Leon, "Muhammad Asad Interview," YouTube, April 1, 2016, https://youtu.be/OuoRAImuF1M. (11:43-12:12)
100 Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 81.

101 For a study of Mawdudi's influence along with Qutb and Shariati, see the conference proceedings and dissertation of Ahmet Köroğlu, "Translating Islamism: Taking Sayyid Qutb, Abu'l Ala Mawdudi and Ali Shariati to Turkey," BRAIS Conference, Nottingham, England, 2019. For his influence in Malaysia and Indonesia, see M. Kamal Hassan, "The Influence of Mawdudi's Thought on Muslims in Southeast Asia: A Brief Survey," *The Muslim World* 93, no. 3/4 (July–October 2003): 429–464.

started this exegetical work in 1942 while living in East Punjab and completed it up to the twelfth chapter—Sūrat Yūsuf, which I will be focusing on in the next chapter.[102] It would take Mawdudi until 1972, a full thirty years later, to complete his entire commentary on the Qur'an, including the Cave chapter. We see evidence of this in how Mawdudi has more extensive references and access to a broader library for the Cave chapter compared to the Joseph chapter.

Part of what is distinctive in Mawdudi's commentary is that he does not simply quote older sources. He writes for a new type of educated Muslim, who may have studied in the new colleges and universities that were burgeoning by the mid-twentieth century, whether in colonial India or post-Partition India and Pakistan, or abroad. In his commentary on the two chapters I study in this dissertation, Mawdudi engages with a wide range of modern disciplines, trying to incorporate and engage with these sources. He also cautions against the great danger he observed in the almost absolute separation or dichotomy between studies on a religious track and those on a secular track.[103] His writings and work can be seen as an attempt to synthesize the traditional and modern.[104]

For Mawdudi, not to work toward the establishment of an Islamic state of governance was to severely marginalize and domesticate the proper sphere of Islam to conceptions of the secular nation-state.[105] Mawdudi did not want to cede ground to this conception of the secular, categorizing it as un-Islamic. As Irfan Ahmed argues, Maududi was so concerned about creating an Islamic state precisely

102 Charles Adam, "Abū'l-A'lā Mawdudi's Tafhīm al-Qur'ān," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 307.
103 Vali Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 19.

104 I cannot do an exhaustive or comprehensive study of Mawdudi and his context here or in the biographical chapter, but I hope I have provided a sufficient overview of some of the more important formative influences on him. I refer interested readers to Nasr's study for a fuller exploration.

105 For an argument against the compatibility of Islamic legal and ethical thought with that of the modern nation-state, see Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

because the colonial secular state had penetrated so far into people's everyday lives.[106] This pushback on a dominant, if not hegemonic, attitude held by many of his contemporaries about the rightful separation of religion and politics points to assumptions regarding modernity and tradition and the specific genealogy of Western secularism, as Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, among others, have argued. In a captivating interview, Asad states, "The development of politico-religious movements ought to force people to rethink the uniquely Western model of secular modernity."[107]

However, Mawdudi also recognizes the importance of what he sees as an Islamic state of mind, or subjectivity, formed through the processes of *tarbiyya* or moral fashioning, for which he selectively draws from the traditions of Sufism. However, he transforms the taking a shaykh or pir as one's spiritual guide into becoming member of the Jamaat-e-Islami party and organization, and following its chapter leaders, since he, like other reformers, was concerned about what he saw as corruption associated with the traditional pir-disciple relationship. This process of moral formation in Mawdudi's prescription for contemporary Muslims involves studying his commentary and taking the Qur'an as a model for life and society. Mawdudi instructs his readers to take note of the moral character formation lessons and apply them for transformation in their individual lives. It is important not reduce Mawdudi to being simply a fundamentalist or "Islamist" obsessed with taking state power, without paying attention to how he envisions the moral formation of the subjects in this state. We do not have to take a laudatory attitude toward Mawdudi's projects, and we can appreciate nuance and even idealized or theorized utopic formulations. But at the same time, we can be

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[106] Irfan Ahmad, *Islamism and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6. I owe this reference to Professor Katherine Ewing.

107 Saba Mahmood, "Interview with Talal Asad: Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions," SEHR 5, no. 1 (February 27, 1996): Contested Polities, http://ebaadenews.blogspot.com/2009/12/interview-with-talal-asad-modern-power.html.

keenly aware of the many failings and moral disconnects that impede these visions of utopia and their practices.[108]

Texts are constantly reinterpreted by readers in their own contexts. Mawdudi grappled with questions of colonial and then modern state rule, justice, imprisonment, character, and morality, and he reads the Qur'anic chapters as a way to comment on these modern realities of life. As previously noted, Mawdudi's commentary on the Qur'an becomes more extensive in its notes over time; he writes over thirty years in different contexts, from being a Muslim minority in India to being involved in the state formulation of Islam in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The way that seventh-century listeners processed the Qur'an's recited narratives was vastly different from the way readers of Mawdudi's print commentary processed those same narratives. I identify in Mawdudi a modern shift to a fixation on trying to ground these narratives in modern historiography and thus identify particular figures, time periods, and regions. Mawdudi takes these narratives to be factually true and tries to use the tools available to him to argue in the language of modern archaeology and historiography for their facticity. I do not mean that because Mawdudi is interested in exploring the modern historical methods he completely expunges the personal and moral points that can be derived from the stories. My point is simply that the criteria for establishing modern historical facticity are not synonymous with methods of interpreting scripture that emphasize personal and abstract lessons that can be learned from reading scripture.

There are continuities whereby Mawdudi builds on the contributions of past exegesis that he read and drew from. But at the same time, there are points in which Mawdudi goes further, extends the arguments, or clearly disagrees with his predecessors regarding positions of interpretations. All this

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108 For Mawdudi's involvement in the persecution of Ahmadis, see Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism Between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

illuminates why Mawdudi continues to be a powerful, attractive force for contemporary Muslims seeking to interpret the Qur'an in conversation with their own modern conditions and concerns.

Mawdudi, with his distinctive education in traditional and modern studies, attempts to make the Qur'an more easily comprehensible in *Tafhim al-Qur'an* (*Towards Understanding the Qur'an*). Mawdudi is keenly aware of the presence of the West, Western Orientalists, modern critiques of religion, and the views of modernists in opposing what they see as superstition and fallacies. At times, he buys into the modernist wave of wanting to salvage "good religion" or "modern religion" or "rational religion" from what he viewed as superstitions.[109] This "enlightened" attempt is similar to what Alireza Doostdar, in another context, of contemporary Iran, has written: "The practices that I study in this book often provoked elite consternation. Religious leaders, intellectuals, journalists, and statesmen criticized engagements with the occult as irrational and downright dangerous."[110] They condemned those who engaged in such "village" practices and "pseudo-Sufism" as "ignorant" and "deviant" from true Islam, similar to what three generations of modernists—from Iqbal[111] to Mawdudi to Fazlur Rahman in the South Asian context—saw as the problems and irrationality of vernacular practices of Sufism, which they were ashamed of, or at least condemned in the harshest of terms.

As Professor Katherine Ewing has shared with me, Mawdudi's followers discouraged her from studying shrine practices and instead encouraged her to interview and spend time with Mawdudi if she wanted "true Islam:"

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[109] The category of "superstition" had been a term used by colonial administrators to dismiss and control popular practices. I owe this point to Professor Katherine Ewing.

110 Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

111 See "Abu Sayeed Nur-ud-Din, "Attitude toward Sufism," in *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan*, ed. Hafeez Malik (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 287–300.

> Confrontations occasionally developed, instigated by bystanders who were upset that a Western researcher would be getting a wrong impression of Islam from such corrupt people. In one incident at one of Lahore's major shrines, a man who identified himself as a member of the Jama'at-i Islami actively sought to prevent a man who identified himself as a qalandar from talking with me, declaring that if I wanted to learn about Islam, I should go talk with the head of the Jama'at-i Islami, Maulana Maudoodi (which I had, in fact, done). In this case, the qalandar availed himself of the power of the state and summoned a policeman.[112]

Ewing places these criticisms of Sufism in a larger historical colonial context when she writes of how Mawdudi and other South Asian reformist movements "have attempted to eliminate all practices associated with Sufi pīrs and shrines, disrupting the hierarchical, mediatory relationship between the pīr and his followers that had echoed and supported the hierarchical administrative structure maintained by the British during the colonial era."[113] The correct understanding and practice of Islam is exactly what is being contested in these debates or, in the language of Talal Asad, in contemporary discursive practices. Part of this embrace of and emphasis on reason and rationality in the modern period may be understood by the broader transformations in society and knowledge whereby, as Charles Taylor notes, there is "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[114] In this context, contemporary Muslim scholars are pressured to present and articulate their religious claims and beliefs as grounded and backed by the epistemologies of logic and rationality, as opposed to "superstitions," "ungrounded fancies," and "fairy tales," which are common charges against religious believers.

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112 Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 205.
113 Ewing, 95.

114 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

Pink highlights how neither Mawdudi nor Qutb[115] called his work a tafsīr, but rather their main point of focus

> is the concept of an Islamic way of life (manhaj) that encompasses every aspect of individual, social and political life, especially the legal system which should not be based on any man-made laws. It follows that the Qur'an is the main guide towards this way of life, a notion that is clearly inspired by the modernist ideas of reading the Qur'an as a book of guidance (hidaya). This results in a marked tendency to understand the Qur'an not so much as a spiritual text but as a book that both explains events in this world and provides rules for human behavior.[116]

Distinctive to his exegetical work is that Mawdudi prefaces his commentary on each chapter (sura) of the Qur'an with an introduction in which he provides some original historical context from traditional Islamic sources. He identifies at which stage in the Prophet Muhammad's life a chapter (or parts of it) was believed to have been revealed and which stage of the movement the chapter was originally addressing. He argues that each chapter of the Qur'an has an internal logic and rationale behind it, and he seeks to identify its "objectives." He outlines "objects of revelation"—what he believes readers should take away as lessons relevant for their lives and struggles. He believed that Muslims who are dedicated to the cause of spreading the message of Islam can be inspired by the struggles of the movement in the Prophetic period.

For Mawdudi, the Qur'anic lessons are open for all Muslims to directly bring into their lives; they do not require membership in a formal Sufi order (tariqa). (I will say more about Mawdudi's relationship

[115] Martin Kramer makes an interesting point about Asad's influence on Sayyid Qutb. Asad's 1934 work, *Islam at the Crossroads*, which critiques materialism (which Asad attributes to Western civilization), was an early influence on Qutb. The Arabic translation was published multiple times in the 1940s and 1950s as *al-Islām 'alā mufṭariq al-ṭuruq*. See Kramer, "The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 235. Kramer (239) also notes how Maryam Jameelah (Margaret Marcus) (1934–2012) read and cherished Asad's travelogue-memoir *The Road to Mecca*, having borrowed it from the public library in Mamaroneck, New York, and reading it numerous times. Jameelah relocated to Pakistan and shared some of Asad's initial hopes of creating a modern Islamic state.
116 Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 184.

with Sufism in a later chapter on his commentary on Sura Kahf.) Mawdudi advocated forming study circles and communities of teachers and "workers" or devotees to the Islamic movement to bring these principles into lived practice. His work, entitled *Tafhim al-Qur'an*, literally means to make the Qur'an comprehensible and understandable; in English, it is titled *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*. While the title in translation may suggest a more tentative venture ("towards"), the work has been taken—especially by Mawdudi's followers—to be definitive of how Muslims should understand the Qur'an. Mawdudi's interpretations superseded and dominated almost all other Qur'anic commentaries; they ended up marginalizing other positions and ways of interpreting the Qur'an that existed in the vast body of Qur'anic exegesis, and they re-shifted the set of concerns that readers take away as primary to the Qur'an's message.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of transformation in the modern period of approaches to Qur'an such as that of Ibn Kathīr, which became widespread in abridged format, and other scholastic approaches which became marginalized. Contemporary Qur'anic commentaries are invested in projects of the reform of Muslim subjectivities and pieties, and present themselves as appealing to the modern person's sense of rationality. The authors appeal to premodern works in selective and critical ways to resonate with the interests and concerns of their own contemporary readers and publishers. In the following chapters, I demonstrate this through close studies of specific passages from two chapters of the Qur'an.

Chapter 2: Biographies and Contexts

Religious Authority in the Modern Era

The commentators I examine wrote and published in the modern contexts of an authority vacuum and contestation. This occurred as those with professional technical education, rather than formal Islamic seminary training, began to increasingly speak and write for "new literate audiences produced by print and media technologies."[1] Thus, "the special claims of the 'ulama as the guardians and authoritative interpreters of religious texts came to be disputed" with the wider availability of printed texts, including translations into vernacular languages.[2] Part of the argument of my dissertation is that it is important to look at multiple Islamic languages, including Urdu and English, in addition to Arabic, as exemplified by Mawdudi, Asad, and Mubārakpūrī's works, respectively.

Contestation around speaking authoritatively in the public sphere regarding what "Islam had to say"[3] or the correct or apt Islamic position on any given issue became widespread. As Zaman writes, "'New religious intellectuals' are not indebted to the 'ulama for their own understanding of Islam, nor do they acknowledge the 'ulama's superior claim to that understanding."[4] This does not mean that the ulama (Muslim religious scholars) did not compete with the new intellectuals.[5] New technologies allowed for

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1 Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 130.

2 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 54.

3 "It is very common to find scholars, both Muslims and non-Muslim, use formulations such as 'Islam says,' implying a claim to normativity and homogeneity that can be [sic] become a powerful tool for discursive debates" (Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012], 109).

4 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 55.

5 Zaman, 58.

ulama of different localities to exchange ideas and forge common links.[6] Furthermore, even those Muslims with contested backgrounds or credentials drew on Islamic sources to justify and support their interpretations.

Juliane Hammer points to the work of Suha Taji-Farouki and others who have linked the "breaking of the monopoly" of the 'ulama to

> the introduction of print culture to Muslim societies, which in turn democratize access to traditional texts, including the Qur'an itself, but also increasingly the texts that the 'ulama had produced and transmitted over the centuries. This democratization of textual access went hand in hand with mass education, which weakened the exclusive knowledge base of the 'ulama.[7]

Many of the "new intellectuals" who "spoke for Islam" can be associated with the Revivalist Movement (*al-sahwa)* of the '60s and '70s.

> By the sixties, across Muslim societies, conscientious men and women without formal seminary educations had inundated bookstores, newsstands, and kiosks with Islamic magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, books, and even fatwas. . . . The new breed of revivalist authors filled the vacuum left by historic institutions of religious authority as they were co-opted and absorbed by colonial and later newly independent postcolonial states such as Syria and Egypt.[8]

As another scholar put it, "Most of the standard-bearers of the religious resurgence came from the intelligentsia and, moreover, branded the 'ulama' as traitors for their subservience to deviant regimes. . . It

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6 Zaman, 108.

7 Hammer, *American Muslim Women*, 102, citing Suha Taji-Farouki, introduction to *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

8 Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 130.

was the modern Muslim intellectual who placed activism and charisma before knowledge and was involved in politics that captured the imagination of Western observers."[9]

As we shall see, the three twentieth-century Qur'anic translators and commentators vary in their level of formal Islamic education as well as in their appeal to and engagement with new forms of knowledge. Mawdudi, Asad, Mubārakpūrī (the abridger of Ibn Kathīr), reformist and activist movements, the growth of the Salafī movement, the prominence of Ibn Kathīr in the twentieth century, and fluctuations in esteem for hadith transmissions in the modern period—all are significant factors to examine to account for their influence on contemporary Muslims. In the following section and subsequent chapters, I start with Mawdudi as the Activist, Asad as the Rationalist, and then looks Mubārakpūrī's abridgement of Ibn Kathīr. Mubārakpūrī and the broader Salafi movement he belonged to were responding both to the Activist movements as well as to the rationalist approach, which they sought to replace with the transmitted approach.

Mawdudi

Abū'l-A'lā Mawdudi (1903–1979) was an incredibly influential Muslim thinker and political figure. In addition to his Qur'anic commentary, he is most known for his political theorizations and writings and advocacy or activism both in colonial India and in the newly formed state of Pakistan. I provide a brief biographical background, which I hope will provide context to his Qur'anic commentary.

Political scientist and historian Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr studies Mawdudi and his political organization, the Jamaat-I Islami, in two monographs. He writes, "Mawdudi is without doubt the most

9 Meir Hatina, '*Ulama,' Politics, and the Public Sphere: An Egyptian Perspective* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2010), 5.

influential of contemporary Islamic revivalist thinkers."[10] Similarly, political scientist Roxanne L. Euben and historian Muhammad Qasim Zaman, in their anthology of "Islamist thought," identify Mawdudi as "one of the most prolific Islamist writers of the twentieth century."[11] They assert that "no figure has influenced the political vocabulary of Sunni Islamism more than Mawdudi."[12] Zaman also writes, "Mawdudi's extensive writings made him the most influential Islamist ideologue in twentieth-century South Asia and one of the most visible of them in the wider Muslim world."[13] Mawdudi's student, the Pakistani economist and Jamaat-I Islami activist Khurshid Ahmad (b. 1932), agrees and calls Mawdudi the most influential Muslim to be alive in the 1970s.[14]

Mawdudi is often labeled an Islamist, or "revivalist," and grouped together with his contemporaries, the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–1989).[15] Islamism, or Resurgent or Reformist Islam, like all labels, can be deceptive, placing individuals into neat categories and leading to quick assumptions about what positions they hold. Closer investigation reveals a much more complicated picture. Presumably, the term "Islamism" denotes Islam made into a political ideology or "ism." However, there are several assumptions at work in this explanation that we ought not to take for granted, including those regarding the "proper" designation or realm of the "religious"

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10 Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3.
11 Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 79.

12 Euben and Zaman, 79.

13 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 275.

14 Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari, "Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi: An Introduction to His Vision of Islam and Islamic Revival," in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi* (Leicester and Jeddah: The Islamic Foundation and Saudi Publishing House, 1979), 362.

15 For the use of "revivalist" for these three figures, see, for example, Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 3. Qutb, in fact, read Mawdudi and was influenced by several of his ideas, as noted by some, including Mahmood Mamdani and Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan*, 140–141.

as opposed to the "political." If a label is necessary, then instead of affirming the connotations and assumptions inherent in the framing of Islam and Islamism, I propose to use "activist."[16]

These labels are not simply the work of outsiders and academics; they are also part of the internal debates underway in Muslim communities. Many contemporary Muslims have bought into using these terminologies and dichotomies, sometimes, for example, using the self-designation of "traditional Islam" as opposed to "political Islam."[17] Critical theorists such as Talal Asad have contributed to our disentanglement of many of the assumptions behind "political religion." Furthermore, the Muslim religious philosopher Shabbir Akhtar points out how the powerful Christian theological assumptions about the proper conduct of a prophet, modeled after understandings of Jesus and philosophies of "turning the cheek," are then inscribed into secular criticisms of Prophet Muhammad for engaging with worldly power.[18]

In India, an important part of Mawdudi's environment was the effort to depoliticize religion and divest the colonial administration of responsibility for religious endowments that was part of their "taming" of religion, in colonial discourse.[19] Partha Chatterjee has argued that nationalism and the modern nation-state reconstituted Hinduism in India and put those who were deemed "religious minorities" on the defense.[20] In this context, Mawdudi was a subaltern, postcolonial writer and powerful critic of Europe's

16 For a similar notion, see Pascal Ménoret, *Graveyard of Clerics: Everyday Activism in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 8. I thank Nareman Amin for this reference.

17 See, for example, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, ed., *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*, foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2004). See in particular chapters by Lumbard, "The Decline of Knowledge and the Rise of Ideology in the Modern Islamic World," 39–78; Fuad S. Naeem, "A Traditional Islamic Response to the Rise of Modernism," 79–120; and T. J. Winter [Abdal Hakim Murad], "The Poverty of Fanaticism," 283–296.

18 See, for example, Shabbir Akhtar, *Islam as Political Religion: The Future of an Imperial Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2011) and *The Final Imperative: An Islamic Theology of Liberation*. (London : Bellew Pub., 1991).

19 Personal communication with Professor Katherine Ewing.

20 Partha Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," *Social Research* 59, no. 1, 1992, cited by Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.

notions of modernity and view of itself as a model of the nation-state and the supposed separation of religion and politics into distinctive spheres that it considered "a harbinger of universal history."[21] As Masuzawa powerfully demonstrates, Europe attempted to "semitize Islam," despite the fact "that the vast majority of the Muslims, then as now, were not Arabs."[22] In this colonial context, Islam and Muslims were constructed by British officers to be inherently intolerant, especially of the Hindu other. Masuzawa writes, "In contrast, monotheism, which was increasingly portrayed as a Semitic tendency, came to represent exclusivity (rejection of multiplicity) rather than universality (orderly embrace of multitudinous totality)."[23] As we will see, Mawdudi was acutely aware of the gaze and critique of Westerners and sought to respond in his writing to some of these framings.

Mawdudi did not accept limiting connotations of the term "religion" for Islam. In a personal reflection, Altaf Gauhar recollects how, for Mawdudi, "the assumption that politics and religion are two different activities, each regulated by different and often contradictory rules, makes no sense at all."[24] As Vali Nasr documents, Mawdudi's project "is closely tied to questions of communal politics and its impact on identity formation, to questions of power in pluralistic societies, and to nationalism. Mawdudi's arguments were anti-Western, but they were motivated by Muslim and Hindu competition for power in British India."[25] Islam for him was more than what the mere modern term of "religion" entails, with its domesticated, private notions of individual morality and spirituality. In Mawdudi's vision, not only are individual efforts to heed the guidance provided by God important, but so is "striving for the reform of the

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21 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), xi.

22 Masuzawa, xiii.

23 Masuzawa, xiii.

24 Altaf Gauhar, "Mawlana Abul A'la Mawdudi—A Personal Account," in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation and Saudi Publishing House, 1979), 276.
25 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 4.

world."[26] On the limitations of the conception of religion for his view of Islam, Mawdudi wrote, "If we begin studying the Qur'ān with the expectation of reading a book on religion we shall find it hard, since our notions of religion and of a book are naturally circumscribed by our range of experience."[27] It is not surprising that Mawdudi welcomed the ability to influence government policy, especially during the reign of Zia al-Haq in the late 1970s.[28]

What forms the educational background of a twentieth-century Muslim scholar? Is it simply the study of certain texts? What leads members of the ulama class to include a particular individual in that distinguished group of interpreters, who can speak and write and comment authoritatively and be accepted as one of the "custodians of traditions," to use Zaman's wording?[29] Part of the contestation over Mawdudi's legacy is whether or not he should be counted as a Muslim scholar (alim), in terms of not only the knowledge and credentials of that title but also the social class and credibility before both laypeople and other scholars.

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26 Mawdudi, "Introducing the Qur'ān," in *Islam: The Way of Revival*, ed. Riza Mohammed and Dilwar Hussain, (Markfield, Leicestershire, UK: Revival Publications, 2003), 70.

27 Mawdudi, "Introducing the Qur'ān," 67.

28 Mentioned briefly by Katherine Pratt Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 284n3.

29 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*.

Mawdudi's status as an alim is not agreed upon.[30] Although we can safely call Mawdudi an alim with respect to his religious training,[31] as Vali Nasr highlights, this was a period when ulama were not well respected by much of the professional and well-educated classes, who were often quite involved in the political organizing of the day. Mawdudi seems to have not advertised his credentials as a "traditional" alim,[32] but to counter the assertion that Mawdudi was not trained as a Muslim scholar, Nasr documents the numerous *ijazas* or teaching licenses that Mawdudi received as a young man from Deobandi-oriented ulama. Mawdudi studied and even collaborated with them as a writer and editor, especially in the movements toward independence from the British.[33]

Regarding his parental line, Mawdudi's mother, Ruqiyah Begum, hailed from a Turkish literary and aristocratic background.[34] Mawdudi's father, Sayyid Ahmad Hasan (1855–1920), was among the first students to study at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which later became Aligarh University,[35]

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30 Given Mawdudi's training and scholarly teaching licenses (*ijazas*), the literature that refuses to recognize his Muslim scholarly credentials or to give him the title of alim seems quite questionable. For example, Nile Green, in his abbreviated introduction to the history of Islam, writes, "Maududi was not a trained member of the ulama. Rather, he was a journalist who learned the value of mass media through his participation in the campaign to save the Ottoman caliphate" (*Global Islam: A Very Short Introduction* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2020], 74). Similarly, Ayesha Jalal writes, "Not a product of western education nor trained as a religious scholar—he was educated almost exclusively at home" (*Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850* [London: Routledge, 2000], 454). Zaman writes that "Mawdudi, for his part, was a journalist and an Islamist thinker, but he too did not have a formal madrasa education, and he neither claimed nor was usually recognized to be one of the 'ulama" (*The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 47).

31 The proper credentials for a Muslim scholar have been widely debated, especially in contemporary Islam. For one ethnographic study at al-Azhar, see Aria Nakissa, *The Anthropology of Islamic Law: Education, Ethics, and Legal Interpretation at Egypt's al-Azhar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

32 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 18. "Mawdudi never publicized his Deobandi training or his ties to the ulama. It was not until after his death that his ijazahs were discovered and references to them began to appear in the Jama'at-i Islami's literature" (19).

33 S. V. R. Nasr, 19.
34 S. V. R. Nasr, 11.

35 For a brief study on the Aligarh University project, see Gail Minault and David Lelyveld, "The Campaign for a Muslim University, 1898–1920," *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (1974): 145–189. See also Ashraf Faruqi, "European Involvement in the Aligarh Movement: The Role and Influence of the European Faculty in the Social and Political Aspects of the Mohamedan Anglo-Oriental College, 1875–1920" ((PhD diss., Duke University, 1978);

founded in 1875 by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898).[36] The efforts of Aligarh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan was much criticized in Muslim circles.[37] The institution connected Mawdudi to the “modernist” Indian stream of Islamic thinkers in the late nineteenth century and gave him early exposure to new approaches in education, including trying to synthesize the “traditional” alim studies found in a madrasa[38] (or Islamic school) of the time with modern subjects.

Mawdudi’s studies began at home, where he was tutored and learned Persian[39] and Urdu.[40] In the evenings, his father would read to him and his siblings from the writings of the important Indian scholar

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Agusni Yahya, “The Impact of Colonial Experience on the Religious and Social Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Ahmad Hassan: A Comparison” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1994); Shaista Azizalam, “Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the ‘Ulama: A Study in Socio-Political Context” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1992); Ruswan, “Colonial Experience and Muslim Educational Reforms: A Comparison of the Aligarh and the Muhammadiyah Movements” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1997); Robert Ivermee, *Secularism, Islam and Education in India, 1830–1910* (London: Routledge, 2015), especially chapter 5, “The Campaign for a Muslim University,” 107–138; Mohammad Sajjad, “Envisioning a Future: Sir Sayyid Ahmad’s Mission of Education,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 108–129; Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, “Casting Aside the Clutches of Conjecture: The Striving for Religious Certainty at Aligarh,” *Islamic Law and Society* 27 (2020): 386–410.

36 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 10.

37 For a study of another “modernist” figure of the time, Shibli Nu’mani (1857–1914), who like Azad was severely critical of the Aligarh and supported a rival, more “traditionalist” institution such as Nadwa al-Ulama, see Mehr Afroz Murad, *Intellectual Modernism of Shibli Nu’mani: An Exposition of His Religious and Political Ideas* (New Delhi: Kitabbhavan, 1996). See also Zaman for Rashid Rida’s and even Muhammad Iqbal’s worry that Aligarh emphasized Western studies too much to the neglect of the Eastern or Islamic branches of knowledge.

38 For an insightful study about the institution of the madrasa, see Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015). Several scholarly and more popular-facing works exist on this educational institution, which received much attention and scrutiny, especially after 9/11, with the association of madrasas with the Taliban and the assumption that these were “factories” for producing extremist militants. For scholarly historical works, see especially Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For a study of madrasas in Pakistan after 2006, especially in relationship to government policy and ideas about participating in violent jihad, see Masoona Bano, *The Rational Believer: Choices and Decisions in the Madrasas of Pakistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). For a more popular-facing work, see Yoginder Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005).

39 For a study indicative of the importance of Farsi or Persian in the Indian context, see Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age, 1000–1765* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

40 For a study on the importance of Urdu print, see Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and the Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). For a study of Urdu

and activist Abu'l-Kalām Azad (1888–1958), whom Mawdudi cites throughout his commentary on the Qur'an.[41] awdudi later studied at the Madrasah-i Fauqaniyah of Awrangabad, which was affiliated with the 'Uthmaniyah University of Hyderabad, another institution that attempted to combine traditional and modern studies.[42] Mawdudi enrolled in the local Daru'l-'ulum seminary in Hyderabad in 1915, where he studied with scholars connected with both Aligarh University and Nadwatul'-Ulama of Lucknow.[43] Family illness and loss forced Mawdudi to abandon his studies and turn to writing to support his family;[44] thus, at the age of fifteen, he started his career and became well-known as a journalist. He is said to have learned English at this age and read widely.[45] In 1921, at the age of eighteen, Mawdudi resumed his studies.[46] In 1923, when he moved to Bhopal in India, he came under the influence of the reformist Ahl-i Hadith movement,[47] and

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poetry in this period of colonial rule and anticolonial struggle, see Ali Khan Mahmudabad, *Poetry of Belonging: Muslim Imaginings of India 1850–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

41 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 12. Azad was born in Mecca, where his father was a Muslim scholar. They relocated to colonial India, where Azad learned English against the wishes of his father. Azad was active in the movement of independence from the British and was involved with several newspaper publication efforts that were politically charged and viewed with suspicion by the British, leading to its ban. He joined the Indian National Congress and was active in the Khilifat movement (1920–1924). For a study of the writings of Azad, including his Qur'anic commentary, see Imadul Hasan Azad Faruqi, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an: A Critical Analysis of Maulana Abu'l-Kalam Azad's Approach to the Understanding of the Qur'an* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1982). On his ideas of education, see G. Rasool Abduhu, *The Educational Ideas of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1973). For works by Azad on the Qur'an, which have now been translated into English, see Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad, *Basic Concepts of the Qur'an*, ed. Syed Abdul Latif (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2003 [1958]) and *The Opening Chapter of the Qur'an (Surah al-Fatihah)*, ed. Syed Abdul Latif (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2007 [1962]).

42 S. V. R. Nasr, 13.

43 S. V. R. Nasr, 14.

44 S. V. R. Nasr, 14-15.

45 Sarwat Saulat, *Maulana Maududi* (Karachi, Pakistan: International Islamic Publishers, 1979), 2.

46 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 17. One of his Arabic teachers was Mawlana 'Abdu'salam Niyazi (d. 1966), whom Mawdudi's father had greatly admired and venerated.

47 S. V. R. Nasr, 17. Bachir Ahmad Khan writes, "Founded by Sayyid Husain Shah Batku at the turn of the 19th century, the Ahl-i-Hadith movement forms a significant part of the history of Islam in Kashmir. The movement's goal was unique in that it advocated purging Islam of its accretions, customs, practices, superstitions, and

when he relocated to Delhi in 1924, he came into contact with Khilafat movement activists, which advocated for an Ottoman sultan as the rightful khalifa (caliph) of the global Muslim community (ummah).[48] In Delhi, Mawdudi continued his studies with Deobandi ulama and "received his ijazahs (certificates to teach religious sciences)" in 1926.[49]

Because Mawdudi studied at a number of institutions instead of completing his studies at one madrasa, he was not "fully recognized by other 'ulama as a properly credentialed religious scholar."[50] Another reason for his disparagement, particularly by Deobandi ulama, was his education under scholars like the Qur'an commentator Hamid al-din Farahi (d. 1930),[51] "who was viewed with considerable suspicion by other 'ulama on account of a modernistic orientation centering on efforts to reinterpret the Qur'an in light of what he took to be the concerns and needs of contemporary Muslims."[52] Mawdudi followed in his teacher's footsteps and did not shy away from addressing what he saw as necessary responses from contemporary Muslims.

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ceremonies with a view to restoring its pristine purity" ("The Ahl-i-Hadith: A Socio-Religious Reform Movement in Kashmir," *The Muslim World* 90, no. 1/2 (Spring 2000): 133–157).

48 For a study of the short-lived Khilafat movement, see A. C. Niemeijer, *The Khilafat Movement in India 1919–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1972). See also Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), especially chapter 4, "The Battle of Geopolitical Illusions (1908–1924)," 133–172; Rosina Nasir, "Contradictions in the Khilafat Movement and Transformations in Abul Kalam Azad: A Historical Analysis of Muslim Politics in British India—1912–1947," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 2: 255–270.

49 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 18.

50 Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 80.

51 On Farahi, see Abdul Rahim Afaki, "Interpreting the Divine Word and Appropriating a Text: The Farahī-Ricoeur Thematic Affinity," in *Islamic Philosophy and Occidental Phenomenology in Dialogue: The Logos of Life and Cultural Interlacing*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, Nazif Muhtaroglu, and Detlev Quintern (Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London: Springer, 2011), 161–172; Jannat Taftahi, Seyyed Mahmoud Mirzsaee al-Husayni, and Ali Nazari, "Quranic Sciences from Abdul Hamid Farahi's Perspective (1863–1930)," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature* 6, no. 7 (2017): 73–80. See also Mustansir Mir, "Elephants, Birds of Prey, and Heaps of Pebbles: Farāhī's Interpretation of Sūrat al-Fīl," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2005): 33–47.

52 Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 80.

Mawdudi was more than just an autodidact, although it is indisputable that his impact was influenced not only by his institutional learning but also by his wide independent reading (of the type of literature he was able to access, read, and cite). Mawdudi was highly regarded by some, including the British- and Berlin-trained Muslim philosopher, poet, and activist in the All India Muslim League Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938). Iqbal invited Mawdudi to work at a new institution for Islamic learning and research called Dar-ul-Islam, which was sponsored in Pathankot in Punjab in 1938.[53] The institute "planned to train competent scholars in Islamics to produce works of outstanding quality on Islam, and above all, to carry out the reconstruction of Islamic Law."[54] Iqbal read *Tarjuman-ul-Quran*, the journal Mawdudi edited, as well as Mawdudi's book on jihad, and his correspondence with Mawdudi expressed appreciation.[55]

Due to an overemphasis on Mawdudi's political activism, some academics make the mistake of accepting the slights of his detractors when they write that Mawdudi was not trained as a religious scholar. Part of this has to do with a larger context in which religious scholars claim to not engage in politics. However, as we know from Foucault and others, even apparently apolitical stances are political. Some

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53 On Iqbal, see Hafeez Malik, ed., *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). Hafeez Malik and Lynda P. Malik write in "The Life of the Poet-Philosopher" that "his critics have charged that Maudūdi has merely used Iqbal's name without the latter's balanced emphasis on modernism" (33). For a philosophical study on Iqbal and his conceptualization of an "open society," see Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Islam and Open Society: Fidelity and Movement in the Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal*, trans. Melissa McMahon (Dakar: Codesria, 2010). See also Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Open to Reason: Muslim Philosophers in Conversation with the Western Tradition*, trans. Jonathan Adjemian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), especially chapter 9, "Philosophy of Movement," 85–97; H. C. Hillier and Basit Bilal Koshul, eds., *Muhammad Iqbal: Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), which includes essays by Ebrahim Moosa, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Sajjad Rizvi, and others, placing Iqbal in conversation with Henri Bergson, Pierce, Hegel, and Rumi and examines his political, philosophical, and social contexts.

54 Ahmad and Ansari, "Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi," 362. Pakistan later established an Islamic Research Institute, which Fazlur Rahman led for several years. See Megan Brankley Abbas, "Between Western Academia and Pakistan: Fazlur Rahman and the Fight for Fusion," *Modern Asian Studies* 51:3, 736—768.

55 Saulat, *Maulana Maududi*, 6.

ulama strongly disagreed with Mawdudi's political views and scholarly writings. At stake in these polemics is who has the authority to speak definitively in interpreting Islam in the contemporary world.

Later in Mawdudi's life, due to his political positions and interpretations, many Deobandi ulama criticized and even condemned his works, questioning his authority and credentials in the scholarly body of interpreters, which they saw themselves as guarding as "custodians of tradition." One must regard these criticisms with suspicion: Mawdudi was vocal in his critique of the ulama of his day, and they responded in kind.[56] This goes a long way in making sense of the vicious attacks on Mawdudi's credibility.

In contrast to many of the ulama of his day, Mawdudi read widely, from the poetry of Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) to Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) to many Western thinkers and philosophers, and he grappled with challenges presented by materialism and modern science.[57] One of Mawdudi's distinctions is the fact that he could read works in English and, as we will see later, cite extensively from the encyclopedias and libraries of his day.[58] As Euben and Zaman put it, "He drew on his uneven but not insubstantial acquaintance with Western thinkers, sociologists, and journalists to present stark contrasts between Islamic ideals and what he saw as the moral depravity of contemporary Western societies."[59] He is echoed in this by his one-time student or devotee, the Jewish American convert to Islam Maryam Jameelah (1934–2012),[60] who published, among many written works, a two-volume book entitled *Western*

56 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 102–103.

57 See the list of Mawdudi's readings in S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 15–16.
58 Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 83; S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 15.

59 Euben and Zaman, 83–84.

60 For an accessible introduction to Jameelah, or Margaret Marcus, who briefly studied at NYU before taking a ship to Egypt and then relocating to Pakistan to be in the company of Mawdudi, see Deborah Baker, *The Convert: A Tale of Exile and Extremism* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011). See also "Maryam Jameelah: A Voice of Conservative Islam," in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, ed. John Esposito and John Voll (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54–67.

Civilization Condemned by Itself, which drew on writers from Richard Wright to Lewis Mumford in a severe critique demonstrating the fallacy of modern progress.

Mawdudi was especially concerned about what he viewed as the secularizing tendencies of the Muslim elites who received modern educations. He saw Western thought as a greater threat to Muslims than temporary military occupation.[61] For these elites, the "traditional" ulama seemed out of touch. Mawdudi tried to appeal to those with Western educations by dabbling in modern forms of knowledge, exemplified by what was considered the pinnacle of knowledge at the time, the encyclopedia[62]—which Mawdudi extensively cites in his Qur'anic commentary—and in the specialization and compartmentalization of the modern research university.[63] Grounded in the traditional Islamic religious education that ulama received in madrasas, his combination of influences led to his powerful reach—hence my saying that he had a hybrid educational background.

Mawdudi was part of a wave of modern Muslims who viewed the religious scholars as having wrongfully monopolized interpretation of Islam in seeking to make Islamic teachings more accessible. One can see the spirit of this modern, even anticlerical, movement in the foreword to a book on Mawdudi, in which the publisher writes that "Islam, monopolized by Mullahs (professional priests), for a few centuries, has now been made possessed of by the laity. Canonically, the gnosis of Islam should not have become the

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61 See Tārik Jān, "Mawdūdī's Critique of the Secular Mind," *The Muslim World* 93, no. 3/4 (July–October 2003): 503–519.

62 For a study of the history of the encyclopedia, see Robert Collison, *Encyclopaedias: Their History throughout the Ages: A Bibliographical Guide with Extensive Historical Notes to the General Encyclopaedias Issued throughout the World from 350 B.C. to the Present Day* (New York: Hafner Pub. Co., 1964). For a study of the factors leading to the increase and decrease of the size of encyclopedias, especially after the 1840s, see Jeff Loveland, "Why Encyclopedias Got Bigger . . . and Smaller," *Information & Culture* 47, no. 2 (2012): 233–254.

63 As Alasdair MacIntyre writes, "The university thus soon became a place where it is nobody's responsibility to relate what is learned and taught in any one discipline to what is learned and taught in any other. The irrelevance of theology to the secular disciplines is a taken-for-granted dogma. . . . The modern university had set out in a direction that led toward the fragmentation of knowledge and understanding, toward a multiplicity of enquiries accompanied by no sense of any underlying unity" (*God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* [Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009], 135).

heritage of the Mullah or the Masjid, and the Faith should have equally embraced in its fold any believer who was sincere in his belief and his practice."[64]

In Delhi, Mawdudi became immersed in the politics of the day. In the context of the anticolonial independence movement, he wrote a favorable biography of Gandhi (1869–1948), which was never published due to being confiscated by the British police. However, with subsequent positions Gandhi would take, Mawdudi would come to resent him.[65] In 1921, he met with two prominent Deobandi scholars and worked as the editor of their newspaper until 1923.[66] Mawdudi spent much of his time "in the company of the towering religious figures of the Jam'iat-i 'Ulama-i Hind." The ulama were heavily involved in politics, including in the aforementioned Khilifat movement and the movement for independence from British colonial rule, which led to Partition and the formation of the state of Pakistan.[67] However, Mawdudi strongly clashed with the Deobandi scholar Husayn Ahmad Madani (1879–1957),[68] whom Mawdudi saw as "being so obsessed with bringing about the end of British colonial rule as to be utterly oblivious of the dangers that a Hindu-dominated India would pose to Muslim religion and culture after the end of British rule."[69]

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64 Farooq Jilani, "Publisher's Note," in Syed As'ad Gilani, *'Maududi' Thought and Movement*, trans. Hasan Muizuddin Qazi (Lahore: Matba'at-ul-Maktabat-el-Ilmiyyah, 1978), xiv.

65 S. V. R. Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, 16.

66 S. V. R. Nasr, 17.

67 For one study on this topic, see Syed M. Zulqurnain Zaidi, *The Emergence of Ulema in the Politics of India and Pakistan 1918–1949: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Writers Club Press, 2003). See also Martin Kramer, *Islam Assembled: The Advent of the Muslim Congresses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Mary Louise Becker, *The All-India Muslim League, 1906–1947: A Study of Leadership in the Evolution of a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

68 On Madani, see Barbara Metcalf, *Husain Ahmad Madani: The Jihad for Islam and India's Freedom* (Oxford: Oneworld Academic, 2012) and "Maulana Husain Ahmad Madani and the Jami'at 'Ulama-i-Hind: Against Pakistan, against the Muslim League," in *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*, ed. Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 35–64.

69 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 35.

In pre-Partition India, Mawdudi advocated for Muslims to stay in India as a "federated state," at first arguing for an undivided India as a "state of federated nations." He tried to spell out his vision of how to address the Hindu and Muslim differences in laws and how various communities would compete to "influence the laws of the federated state as a whole."[70] He was severe in his criticism of Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948) and the Muslim League and "practically excluded the majority of Muslims from his definition of the true community of Islam."[71] Zaman notes that despite these disagreements, in a wider spectrum of Islamic movements, "Mawdudi's understanding of Islam tends to reveal greater affinity with that of the Deobandis than it does with any other doctrinal orientation" in South Asia.[72]

Mawdudi's vision of a correctly practiced Islamic faith emphasized following a Muslim leader (namely, himself) and moving away from individual practice and the path of those Indian ulama who supported the Indian National Congress. "Submission to Allah, Maudoodi seems to have believed, meant obeying whoever could claim to be the authoritative interpreter of the divine will."[73] Mawdudi "held that the pre-Islamic age of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) had made such a resurgence in the modern period that an 'ideal renewer' (*mujadddid-i kamil*) would be needed to establish the caliphate after the Prophetic model."[74] Mawdudi held that in the early century after the Prophet Muhammad's passing, the caliphate fell short of the prophetic model and soon turned into a monarchy.[75]

70 Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 455.

71 Jalal, 455.

72 Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan*, 267.

73 Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 455.

74 Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2019), 132, citing Jan-Peter Hartung, *A System of Life: Mawdudi and the Ideologisation of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79–81.

75 For criticizing the revered Companions of the Prophet, especially Uthman b. 'Affan (576–656, r. 644–656), the third Sunni caliph, Mawdudi received severe criticism and accusations of sympathy for Shi'ism (Fuchs, 172). Fuchs

Mawdudi's commentary on the Qur'an should not be viewed as a simple reflection on the text or as decontextualized from his circumstances, as if the background, experiences, and thought patterns of his readers and interpreters did not affect how they engaged with the texts. Rather, as Nile Green writes,

> For all his talk of returning to the core teaching of the Quran, Maududi was deeply influenced by the global political currents of his time. He borrowed key political concepts, such as the notion of an inqilab (revolution) led by a gorih (vanguard), from the lexicon of the Indian Marxists he encountered during his years as a journalist. Having come of age under British rule over India, he also shared the antipathy to the imperialist West of his Marxist contemporaries, though, like al-Banna, he sought to replace Western hegemony with state-implemented Sharia. After moving to Pakistan and transforming the Jama'at-I Islami into a transnational political party, he came to regard Asian and Middle Eastern nationalists as the divisive enemies of his global Islamic revolution.[76]

With the Partition of India in 1948, Mawdudi migrated to the newly formed state of Pakistan. Despite his disagreements with the Muslim League, "it was in Pakistan rather than in postcolonial India that Mawdudi chose to live, focusing his energies on calls for the implementation of Islamic law, on educating people in the norms of what he saw as true Islam, and in mobilizing religio-political groups for the establishment of an Islamic state."[77] Building an Islamic state became fundamental to Mawdudi's vision of Islam truly understood and practiced.[78] Ayesha Jalal writes of the ulama who were politically active in the independence movement for India and ultimately for the nation-state of Pakistan: "Of these, by far the most influential individual was Abul Ala Maudoodi who on 11 March 1941 had formed the Jamat-i-Islami in the district of Pathankot in eastern Punjab."[79] Serving as the chief or amīr of this organization until 1972

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also mentions how Khomeini and Mawdudi were lumped together in some publications; see *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 267n127.

76 Green, *Global Islam*, 74–75.

77 Euben and Zaman, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 81.

78 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 104.

79 Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 454.

was a central mechanism for Mawdudi's political organizing.[80] His more than one hundred books and essays have enjoyed wide distribution and translation into at least forty languages.

Muhammad Asad

In this section, I present an overview of Muhammad Asad's life, including some of his important connections, positions, and accomplishments, to provide background for his Qur'anic commentary. Born Leopold Weiss in Austria-Hungary, Asad was fluent in several languages (including Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, German, Polish, French, and English). His grandparents were Orthodox Jews, and his paternal grandfather was a rabbi.[81] His parents were more secular; his father was a successful lawyer.[82] Asad left university studies in Vienna after two years to work as a journalist in Berlin, writing for the important pre-Nazi periodical *Frankfurter Zeitung*.83 After visiting his maternal uncle, Dorian, a student of Freud who worked as a psychiatrist in Jerusalem and was opposed to Zionism,[84] he traveled to the newly formed nation-states of Syria and Iraq,

80 For a full study of the Jamaat, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

81 Asad's grandfather, Benjamin Weiss (1841–1912), served as rabbi in Czernowitz (present-day Ukraine). See Muhammad Asad and Pola Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart (1932–1992): Part-II of The Road to Mecca*, ed. and annotated by M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore: Pakistan Writers Cooperative Society, 2015), 299n4.

82 Shalom Goldman, "Leopold Weiss, the Jew Who Helped Invent the Modern Islamic State," *Tablet*, July 1, 2016, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/jew-helped-invent-islamic-state; Karl Gūnter Simon, "Muhammad Asad and *The Road to Mecca*: Text of Muhammad Asad's Interview with Karl Gūnter Simon," *Islamic Studies* 37:4, 536.

83 The *Frankfurter Zeitung* operated in pre-Nazi times and later became *Frankfurter Allegmeine Zeitung*. In the summer of 1988, this newspaper sent Karl Gunter Simon to interview Asad. See Asad and Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart*, 280–281.

84 Leon, "Muhammad Asad Interview," uploaded April 1, 2016, https://youtu.be/OuoRAImuF1M. First aired in 1992 as "A Tribute to Muhammad Asad 1900–1992" for a Muslim broadcast channel called Islamic Information Service (IIS) Islam, it was hosted by a white American female Muslim, Nasiha Al-Sakina. Originally named Nancy Lydick, she came from a conservative Christian family in Texas. A psychologist at the National University in Los Angeles, she was "the only American woman to co-anchor an internationally televised show for Muslims" (Sharon

which had previously been part of the Ottoman Empire. He started writing articles about his travels, including a book in German, *The Unromantic East*.[85] He interacted with Bedouins and elite and "commoners" in a wide variety of Muslim lands. During subsequent journeys to Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, and Russia, he became increasingly attracted to Islam. After converting in 1926 with an Indian imam, he traveled widely from Berlin to Muslim-majority countries during a time of independence from colonial rule and the formation of modern nation-states. Asad lived in Arabia for six years, where he interacted with the founder of the Saudi state, Ibn Sa'ud (1875–1953, r. 1932–1953). Asad is perhaps most well-known for writing *The Road to Mecca* about his time in Arabia. Published in 1954 by a mainstream American publishing house, Simon & Schuster, the book was reviewed favorably in the *New York Times*. His travelogue/memoir continues to be quite popular in many Western Muslim circles as a classic of modern Muslim travel writing and conversion stories. The memoir only recounts his life up to 1932. As he lived until 1992, there was still much to say about his fascinating career over those next sixty years, during which he traveled to Pakistan, the United States, Switzerland, Tangiers, and Spain. A second book, entitled *Homecoming of the Heart*, was published with the assistance of his third wife, Pola, in 2015.

In 1934, Asad wrote an essay, "Islam at the Crossroads," about the need to establish modern states based on what he saw as Islamic principles. In 1932, Asad had moved to British India, where he met with Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who encouraged him to stay and work to establish the separate Muslim state that would be Pakistan. Iqbal also encouraged Asad to translate the

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Whitley, "Close-up: The Lone Star of Islam," *Los Angeles Times*, June 12, 1994, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-06-12-tm-3091-story.html.

85 Leopold Weiss, *Unromantisches Morgenland, aus dem Tagebuch einer Reise* [*The Unromantic Orient by Muhammad Asad*], trans. Elma Ruth Harder (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2004).

canonical hadith collection of Bukhari into English.[86] Asad took up this project enthusiastically, but his efforts were interrupted by war, and only one volume was published. Interestingly, Asad strongly defended the authenticity of hadith, especially those collected in the canonical Sunni collections of Bukhari and Muslim.[87]

After the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and the German annexation of Austria, Asad's Austrian parents were murdered by the Nazis. In Lahore that year, the British charged Asad, his then wife, Munira, and son, Talal, with being "enemy aliens" and arrested them. Asad remained imprisoned until 1945, the end of the war. Munira and Talal had been released earlier and hosted by a friend of Asad in Jamalpur, in the Indian state of Bihar. Following Partition and

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86 Bruce Lawrence, *The Koran in English* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 69. This work of 306 pages was originally published in Lahore in 1938 (*Sahīh al-Bukhârî: Being Traditions of the Sayings and Doings of the Prophet Muhammad, Narrated by His Companions to Those Who Followed Them, and Compiled under the Title* Kitâb al-Jâmi'as-Sahîh *by Imâm Abû 'Abd Allâh Muhammad Ibn Ismâ'îl al-Bukhârî / Translated from the Arabic with Explanatory Notes by Muhammad Asad* [Lahore: Arafat Publications, 1938–]) and then reprinted in Granada in 1981 (*Ṣaḥîḥ al-Bukhâraî: The Early Years of Islam: Being the Historical Chapters of the Kitâb al-jāmi' aṣ-ṣaḥîḥ / Compiled by Imâm Abû 'Abd-Allâh Muḥammad ibn Ismâ'îl al-Bukhârî; Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad* [Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1981]). A translation of the entirety of the *Sahih al-Bukhari* would later be taken up by the Salafi Pakistani translator and medical doctor Muhammad Muhsin Khan with Dr. M. Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali. This translation, I believe, has enjoyed more widespread circulation among Muslim communities in the West in recent decades as it is a complete translation, more readily available, and more theologically acceptable to Salafi-oriented Muslims than the rationalist orientation of Muhammad Asad. See *The Translation of the Meanings of Al-Lu' lu' wal marjan: A Collection of Agreed upon Ahadith from Al-Bukhari and Muslim, Arabic-English / Compiled by Fuwad Abdul Baqi; Rendered into English by Muhammad Muhsin Khan*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1991). The complete translation is *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari: Arabic-English, tr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan*, 9 vols. (Jeddah: Dar-us-Salam Publications, 1997).

87 Asad wrote regarding the sunnah, which he defined as "the example the Prophet has set before us in his actions and sayings": "Neglect of the *Sunnah* is synonymous with decomposition and decay of Islam. The *Sunnah* was the iron framework of the House of Islam; and if you remove the framework [of] a building can you be surprised if it breaks down like a house of cards?" (*Islam at the Crossroads* [New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2014 (1934)], 114. Furthermore: "We should think that the opponents of orthodox thought would be able to bring forward really convincing arguments which would establish, once for all, the unreliability of the Traditions ascribed to the Prophet. But this is not the case. In spite of all the efforts which have been employed to challenge the authenticity of *Hadith* as a body, those modern critics, both Eastern and Western, have not been able to back their purely temperamental criticism with results of scientific research. It would be rather difficult to do so, as the compilers of the early *hadith*-collections, and particularly the Imams Bukhari and Muslim have done whatever was humanly possible to put the authenticity of every Tradition to a very rigorous test—a far more rigorous test than European historians usually apply to any historical document" (121–122).

the formation of Pakistan in August 1947, which Asad supported, he was honored by Pakistan as a full citizen and briefly served in diplomatic functions as Pakistan's envoy to the United Nations in 1952.88 Asad also served on the board of a Pakistani Islamic research institute by invitation from Mawdudi.[89] As I will note below, Mawdudi's relationship with Asad later soured due to rumors concerning Asad's divorce from Pola and his objections to some of Asad's interpretations of the Qur'an. Under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Asad worked to establish the Department of Islamic Reconstruction (DIR) and helped draft Pakistan's first constitution.[90] After a falling out with the Pakistani authorities, he retired from this post and devoted his attention to writing.

In 1961, Asad wrote his views of Islamic principles for state and governance.[91] Similar to Mawdudi, Asad questioned the partitioning of religion and politics into separate spheres under a regime of secularism: "The well-known injunction of the Gospels: 'Give Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and give God that which belongs to God'—has no room in the theological structure of Islam, but Islam does not admit the existence of a conflict between the moral and the socio-economic requirements of our existence."[92] Asad adds, "We believe that Islam, unlike other

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88 Asad's third wife, Pola, wrote, "He loved Pakistan, *his* conception of Pakistan, even when it turned its back on him, and he never felt resentment at the treatment he had received from it. He remained a citizen—the first citizen of Pakistan—until the end, although he had been strongly tempted to accept the generous, spontaneous gesture of Amir Salman to have Saudi citizenship and passport—which would have made his life and his travels so much easier" (Asad and Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart*, 291).

89 M. Aamer Sarfraz, "Early History of Islam Needs Fresh Appraisal—IX," *Daily Times*, December 7, 2018, https://dailytimes.com.pk/330688/early-history-of-islam-needs-fresh-appraisal-ix/.

90 Sarfraz, "Early History of Islam Needs Fresh Appraisal," *Daily Times.*

91 Muhammad Asad, *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

92 Muhammad Asad, *The Spirit of Islam* [reprint of *Islam at the Crossroads*] (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1984 [1980, 1979]), 1.

religions, is not only a spiritual attitude of mind, adjustable to different cultural settings, but a self-sufficing orbit of culture and a social system of clearly defined features."[93] He found Marxism to be "purely materialist" and unsatisfying to the spiritual and intellectuals needs of human beings.[94] Asad became disappointed with the leadership of the newly formed states of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran under Khomeini (1902–1989, r. 1979–1989).[95] He felt his ideas for creating a modern Muslim democratic state fell on deaf ears. Asad believed that prioritizing punishments was not the optimal way for Muslim states to operate. His vision ultimately differed from that of Islamists such as Mawdudi, who in turn, in a letter to the American Jewish convert to Islam Maryam Jameelah, wrote of his loss of respect for Asad because of his lifestyle choices and supposed failure to live up to the dictates of the religion.[96]

It is curious that, despite all of Asad's entanglements with political Islam, Asad stood in contrast to Qutb and Mawdudi, who drew implications from the Joseph narrative for the political arrangement of society and commented on the supposed degradation of the moral fabric of the

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93 Asad, *The Spirit of Islam*, 6.

94 Goldman, "Leopold Weiss."

95 Martin Kramer, "The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (Born Leopold Weiss)," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 242. Asad likened Khomeini to Hitler: "Khomeini has done for Islam what Hitler did for Germany." He also noted that Khomeini was the same age as him. See Simon, "Muhammad Asad and *The Road to Mecca*," 543.

96 Deborah Baker writes how Jameelah "After reading *Islam at the Crossroads* by Muhammad Asad, the Jewish convert whose book *The Road to Mecca* had made such a deep impression on her, Margaret [Maryam] began to articulate the kernel of her argument against modern America." Deborah Baker, *The Covert: A Tale of Exile and Extremism* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011), 136. Baker also notes that Jameelah wrote a "glowing appreciation of Sayyid Qutb's work *Social Justice in Islam*" as "one of the first essays" she wrote as a student at New York University. 137. Jameelah converted with Shaikh Daoud Ahmad Faisal, the imam at the State Street Mosque near Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. 138. Later in her life, Jameelah would could to see "Mawdudi's vision of Islam was modernism at its very worst." 197. For a study that examines Asad's influence on Jameelah, see Zohaib Ahmad, "Aspects of Maryam Jameelah's Post-Conversion Understanding of Islam," *Islamic Studies* 58(1):33-49.

palaces and aristocracy. Asad focused on drawing moral lessons from the Joseph narrative and contrasting it at times with the biblical version. The same was the case for his commentary on the Chapter of the Cave, where he focused on allegorical readings and argued that the primary takeaway was that one can balance power and material possessions with faith and a deep spirituality or mysticism. Asad seems to have despaired of the directions that political Islam chose, manifested in the projects of Mawdudi and Khomeini, of whom he was very critical. Perhaps, in his final project, Asad found solace in seeing the Qur'an as a book of morality that governed the individual rather than any communal political projects. Asad started to take notes for a future publication entitled *Meditations on the Qur'an*, but this did not come to fruition.[97]

Asad started his Qur'anic commentary project in 1960 while living in Geneva, Switzerland; in 1964 he resided in Tangier, Morocco. He published the work in 1980 in Gibraltar.[98] King Faysal (r. 1964–1975) was a patron of his project after Asad reestablished relations with him in 1951 on his visit to Saudi Arabia.[99] The Muslim World League (Rābiṭah al-'Alam al-Islamī), formally established in 1962, subscribed in advance to Asad's commentary under the direction of King Faysal in 1963.[100] This was an early indication of the growing role Saudi Arabia would have in the

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97 Asad and Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart*, 271. The work "would bring out new aspects of the Holy Book, further deepening the commentary which he had already written—in short, a commentary on his own commentary. Although he had some notes to this end, he never really got down to writing it."

98 Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'ān: Muhammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 15:1, 88n3. Asad spent significant time in study in Medina during his stay in Arabia, in addition to being at the court of Ibn Sa'ud in Riyadh. On the basis of these meetings and travels, Asad wrote favorably of the Sa'ud regime in German and Austrian periodicals, from which he earned his livelihood. Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 232, citing Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 48.

99 Asad was highly expressive of his disappointment in Ibn Sa'ud's rule and the royal family's indulgence in luxury. However, as Kramer notes, later editions of *The Road to Mecca* toned down these criticisms ("The Road from Mecca," 241, noting the difference between pages 177–181 in the 1954 edition and pages 177–181 in the fourth (1980) edition).

100 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 241.

patronage of Muslim education and institutions, such as with the establishment of the University of Medina in the 1960s[101] and the publication and distribution of their choice of translations of the Qur'an and hadith collections.

Asad published a partial translation of the first nine chapters of the Qur'an in 1964. His translation and commentary came under criticism for its modernist leanings and allegoric interpretations, leading to a ban in Saudi Arabia in 1974.[102] This meant the end of patronage from King Faysal. Asad's wife Pola writes concerning these objections, chiefly attributing them, interestingly, to Mawdudi's English-speaking followers:

> The *Rabitah* had originally been prepared to sponsor the publication—not the work, which was done independently by Asad and with precious little money at his disposal throughout the long years which he spent on it. But differences had arisen among some of its scholars—some of whom were not of the first rank—about this or that of his interpretations. The principal movers in these objections—almost never the same—were Pakistanis—in short, the followers of Maulana Mawdoodi of our Pakistan days. Since these people were the only ones really conversant with English, however bad, they presented their various objections to the Arab scholars from their own particular point or points of view, often quite incorrectly. But the damage was done and *Rabitah* decided not to publish the work unless my husband agreed to their arbitrary censorship, that is, to change a handful of his honestly-arrived-at conclusions into line with their own. This was, of course, impossible for any really honest man to do—and Muhammad Asad was a completely honest man. He had worked with full integrity and consciousness of his duty to God over many, many years, always conscious that he was an ordinary human being—and thus fallible—but not prepared to be dishonest with his own *self* and, in the final resort, with God. The financial gain would have been tremendous had he been prepared to compromise with his conscience, but it would have been fatal to his integrity; he would never again been able to live with himself. I, of course, entirely agreed with him.[103]

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101 For a study of the finances and inner workings of the establishment of this university and the makeup of its teachers, see Michael Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital, and the Islamic University of Medina: A Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 2015): 701–721.

102 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242, citing Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 334n59; Khalid Blankinship, *The Inimitable Qur'ān: Some Problems in English Translations of the Qur'ān with Reference to Rhetorical Features* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 24.

103 Asad and Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart*, 249–250.

However, some of Asad's friends, including the Saudi minister of oil and natural resources, Ahmad Zakī Yamanī (1930–2021), to whom Asad dedicated his collection of essays, *This Law of Ours*, supported the completion of the project.[104] Yamanī was instrumental in the publication of a new journal entitled *Arabia*, "which was to devote many of its pages to the works of Muhammad Asad and to champion his translation of the Holy Qur'an."[105] From 1982, Asad lived in Sintra and then in southern Spain. In an unedited hour-long interview at his house in Granada in 1988, he recalls his travels, encounters with political leaders, journey to Islam, and views on modern Muslim states.[106] He died in 1992 in Granada.

Asad's translation and commentary on the Qur'an, entitled *The Message of the Qur'an* (1980), is dedicated to "people who think," signaling the rationalist orientation of the work. Bruce Lawrence calls Asad a "forensic rationalist"[107] and notes his influence and popularity, especially among "contemporary explorers of the Qur'an with a modern, pragmatic, and rational bent," prizing Asad's momentous work as his *magnum opus*.[108]

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104 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 242.

105 Asad and Hamida Asad, *Homecoming of the Heart,* 258. Another important supporter of the publication was "Muhammad Salahuddin, an Egyptian who made this magazine a vehicle for promoting Asad and his works. After some years this journal was closed" (266n4).

106 Leon, "Muhammad Asad Interview."

107 Lawrence, *The Koran in English*, 65.

108 Lawrence, 66.

The argument for Islam as a religion of reason is especially pronounced in Asad's commentary. This makes sense in the context of Asad's biographical background: a European of Jewish background witnessing the horrific events of WWII and the subsequent violence that occurred in newly formed postcolonial Muslim countries such as Pakistan. Asad made a case for the rationality of believing in God in a world that perhaps became disenchanted and suspicious of religious claims. He argued with other modernist Muslim thinkers against superstitions: "the absolute condemnation of this sin is solely designed to benefit *man* by freeing him from all superstition, and thus enhancing his dignity as a conscious, rational being."[109]

Asad emphasized the Qur'anic message as "better conforming to the demands of reason."[110] He highlighted the role of the mind and intellect throughout that text:

> "seeing with one's mind": and so it signifies "the faculty of understanding based on conscious insight" as well as, tropically, "an evidence accessible to the intellect" or "verifiable by the intellect". Thus, the "call to God" enunciated by the Prophet is described here as the outcome of a conscious insight accessible to, and verifiable by, man's reason: a statement which circumscribes to perfect the Qur'anic approach to all questions of faith, ethics and morality, and is echoed many times in expressions like "so that you might use your reason" (*la 'allakum ta'qilūn*), or "will you not, then, use your reason?" (*a fa-lāa ta'qilūn*), or "so that they might understand [the truth]" (*la'allahum yafqahūn*), or "so that you might think" (*la'allakum tatafakkarūn*); and, finally, in the oft-repeated declaration that the message of the Qur'ān as such is meant specifically "for people who think" (*li-qawmin yatafakkarūn*).[111]

This pronounced emphasis on rationality, thinking, evidence, and reason versus "just believing" or superstition led many observers to view Asad as a rationalist. Some even sought to label him in

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109 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 384n39.

110 Asad, 384n40.

111 Asad, 396n104.

relation to the early Islamic rationalist school of thinking: neo-Mut'azilite. This better situates Asad in the context of post-Enlightenment, post-Christianity critiques of religion and his attempt to push back against the dominance of secularist and atheistic modes of thinking.

Despite this categorization, we should not over-read the meaning of rationality in Asad's thought. He still argued for something beyond the world of the mind. "Man is unable to explain to himself the mystery of life, the mystery of birth and death, the mystery of infinity and eternity. His reasoning stops before impregnable walls."[112] While reason and evidence are important, there is still room for mystery and the ineffable. Asad argued that "the grasp of the totality itself remain[s] beyond the methodical equipment of human reason."[113] The idea of a divine plan to the cosmos, in Asad's conceptualization, is actually in line with reason, as he found it unreasonable to think that everything is merely "the result of a blind play of forces without consciousness and purpose."[114]

Although categorized as a rationalist, Asad left room for the "supernatural" in the form of divine disclosure to human beings; he saw the Qur'an as a "God-inspired book."[115] It "was not the mere human wisdom of a man of a distant past in distant Arabia. However wise he may have been, such a man could not by himself have foreseen the torment so peculiar to this twentieth century. Out of the Koran spoke a voice greater than the voice of Muhammad."[116] Asad saw the Qur'an not

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112 Asad, *The Spirit of Islam*, 6.

113 Asad, 7.

114 Asad, 7.
115 Lawrence, *The Koran in English*, 68.

116 Lawrence, 68–69, citing Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 329–331.

as a relic of seventh-century Arabia but as a text speaking relevantly to the modern condition. While holding to that idea of the Qur'an's inspiration, Asad went to great lengths to circumvent miraculous occurrences in the Qur'anic narratives.

Lawrence writes, "What also distinguished *The Message of the Qur'an* is its rational tone and its pointillist format. It is intended to provide a novel rendition—at once idiomatic and explanatory—of the Qur'anic message into English, even while presenting that message as one marinated in Arabic and only lightly supplemented in English."[117] In the commentary on Sūra Yūsuf, Asad noted that the Qur'anic verses "are meant to impress upon everyone who listens to or reads the Qur'ān that its appeal is directed, primarily, to man's *reason*, and that 'feeling' alone can never provide a sufficient basis of faith."[118]

Asad, in some commonality with Mawdudi, emphasized seeing the Qur'an and Islam as a religion of the intellect, of reason and rationality. For Asad, Islam and the Qur'an are in direct contrast to the unreasonable dogmas and superstitions demanded by other religions. Islam, in his view, is thus uniquely fit to fill the spiritual void so prevalent in the modern world.[119]

Mubārakpūrī

The exegetical work of Ibn Kathīr was abridged, as the cover page states, "by a group of scholars under the supervision of Shaykh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarkpuri." Mubarakpūrī (1942–2006) was an Indian scholar born in Husainabad, in the northern part of Mubarakpur, where his

117 Lawrence, 70.

118 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 377.
119 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 243.

name comes from, in Uttar Pradesh.[120] From a young age, Mubarakpūrī read Qur'an with his grandfather and uncle. He studied in madrasa in the 1950s at Madrasa Arabia Darut-Taleem, one mile from his home village, and Madarsa Ehyaul Uloom, with an emphasis on Islamic studies and Arabic literature. He also studied at Madarsa Faid Aam in Maunath Bhanjan, District Azamgarh,[121] where he received the Fadilat degree and took the government-administered exams to receive the Maulvi and Alim certificate in 1960. After changes in the curriculum, he again took the Fazil[122] exams, for which he received high marks. He taught for about a decade in madrasas in northern India, including Madarsa Faid Aam, where he had studied, in addition to serving as principal at the Madrasah Faidul-Uloom at Seoni (M.P.), India, and Madrasah Arabia Darut-Taleem.

From 1974 to 1988, he taught at Jamiah Salafiyah in Banaras, India. Zaman notes that this institution is "a large educational complex that houses 500 students, was inaugurated in 1966 by the Saudi ambassador and was financed in part by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates."[123] He was appointed the chief editor of a Salafi Urdu monthly magazine ("Muhaddith," associated with Jamiah Salafiyah) from 1980 to 1988. After that, he began working at a research institute affiliated with the Islamic University of Medina.[124] After suffering a stroke the previous

120 "Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubārakpūrī," Dar-us-Salam Publications, https://dar-us-salam.com/authors/safiur-rahaman.htm.

121 Barbara D. Metcalf notes that Azamgarh became "a celebrated center of the Ahl-i Hadis by the end of the [nineteenth] century" (*Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982], 275–276n21).

122 *Fazilat* are degrees issued to graduates of madrasas. See Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?*, 548.

123 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 175.

124 See "Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubārakpūrī."

year, he passed away on a Friday in December 2006 in his hometown of Mubarakpur.[125] He had authored seventeen books in Urdu and Arabic.

He is most well-known for his popular sirah book, or biography of the Prophet Muhammad, known as *al-Rahīq al-Makhtūm (The Sealed Nectar)*, which won the first-place prize granted by the Muslim World League in a competition for a prophetic biography in 1979.[126] Published by Darussalam, the book is still found in many Islamic centers, bookstores, and homes. He also wrote a history of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.[127] The scholar had notes and commentaries in Arabic on three hadith collections: a short collection of hadith dealing with legal matters and an abridgment of the canonical Sahih Muslim hadith collection as well as the collection of hadith by Nawawi, entitled *Garden of the Righteous*.[128] He revised a work (which has been translated into English) of biographies on the female contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad to whom he gave the glad tidings (*bishara*) of entering Paradise.[129] He also authored a three-volume work on the

125 Abu Moosa, "Biography of Safiur Rahman Mubārakpūrī," Al Istiqaamah, July 2, 2020, https://istiqaamah.net/biography-of-safiur-rahman-Mubārakpūrī/ (biography published from *Sealed Nectar*).
126 Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakpūrī, *al-Raḥīq al-makhtūm: baḥth fī al-sīrah al-Nabawīyah* (al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā', 1984). Translated as Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubārakpūrī, *The Sealed Nectar (Ar-raheequl Makhtum): Biography of the Noble Prophet (ṣallá Allāh ʻalayhi wa-sallam)* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2011).

127 *Holy Makkah: Brief History, Geography & Hajj Guide: Prepared by a Group of Scholars Under the Supervision of Safiur-Rahman Mubārakpūrī* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008); *History of al-Madinah al Munawarah / Compiled by a Group of Scholars Under the Supervision of Safiur Rahman Mubārakpūrī, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2002).

128 Aḥmad ibn ʻAlī ibn Ḥajar al-ʻAsqalānī, *Bulūgh al-marām min adillat al-aḥkām maʻa taʻlīqah Itḥāf al-karām li-Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī* (Banāras: Idārah al-Buḥūth al-Islāmīyah wa-al-Daʻwah wa-al-Iftā' bi-al-Jāmiʻah al-Salafīyah, 1982); Imām al-Ḥāfiẓ Abī al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim al-Qushayrī al-Nīsābūrī, *Minnat al-munʻim fī sharḥ Ṣaḥiḥ Muslim: al-musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-mukhtaṣar min al-sunan bi-naql al-ʻadl ʻan al-ʻadl ʻan Rasūl Allāh; al-shāriḥ Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī*, 4 vols. (Riyāḍ: Dār al-Salām, 1999); Abu Zakariya Yahya bin Sharaf An-Nawawi Ad-Dimashqi, *Collection from Riyādus-Sâliheen*, Ahâdīth selected and collected by Safiur-Rahmān Mubārakpūrī, trans. Muhammad Amin Abu Usamah Al-Arabi Bin Razduq (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2011).
129 Mahmood Ahmad Ghadanfar, *Great Women of Islam: Who Were Given the Good News of Paradise*, trans. Jamila Muhammad Qawi; revised by Sheikh Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubārakpūrī; ed. Muhammad Ayub Sapra and Muhammad Farooq (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2001).

noble character of the Prophet Muhammad, which brings together verses of the Qur'an and hadith reports on the topic.[130] In 1987, his study on political systems and Islam was published in Egypt, which indicates the author's reach and influence in the Arab world.[131] More specific to the South Asian context, Mubārakpūrī wrote a polemical treatise against the Ahmadis or Qadiyanis.[132]

In his introduction to the Arabic abridgment of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr, Mubārakpūrī writes how this work of tafsīr is "from the greatest of these works, and most accepted and widespread in this ummah" or community of Muslims.[133] However, the popularity of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr is a twentieth-century phenomenon, as opposed to its reception over the previous seven hundred years. Mubārakpūrī especially notes Ibn Kathīr's scholarship in hadith and history, crediting Abdul Malik Mujahid, the director of the publishing house Dār al-Salām, for commissioning a body of translators to translate this work into several languages after abridging it and citing its sources. Which works get selected for translation and then made available to Muslims is an important focal point: certain ideas and projects enjoy greater prominence and circulation than others.

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130 Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm ʻAbd al-Raḥmān, et al*., Wa-innaka la-ʻalá khuluq ʻaẓīm: al-Rasūl Muḥammad, Ṣallá Allāh ʻalayhi wa-sallam* (Cairo: Sharikat Kindah lil-Iʻlām wa-al-Nashr, 2006).
131 The 117-page work examining the effects of European colonialism, especially questions surrounding democracy and "Islamic rule," deserves further study: Ṣafī al-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī, *al-Aḥzāb al-sīyāsīyah fī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Saḥwah, 1987).

132 Ṣafīurraḥmān Mubārakpūrī, *Qādiyāniyyat apne ā'īne meṉ* (Lahore: Maktabah-yi Islāmiyah, 2008). For studies on the Ahmadi movement in Pakistan, see Nicholas H. A. Evans, *Far from the Caliph's Gaze: Being Ahmadi Muslim in the Holy City of Qadian* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Antonio R. Gualtieri, *Conscience and Coercion: Ahmadi Muslims and Orthodoxy in Pakistan* (Montreal: Guernica, 1989); Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Aḥmadī Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

133 Mubārakpūrī, "Introduction to the First Edition," in *al-Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr fī Tahdhīb Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Riyadh: Dar al-Salām, 2013), 5.

Mubārakpūrī states that editors made abridgments when several hadiths had a similar meaning and added section headings to aid with readability. Interestingly, not until the second edition did the publishers and scholarly committee take out what they deemed to be very weak hadiths.[134]

Mubārakpūrī's work clearly emphasizes hadith collections and commentaries. The prevalence of print works in the modern period proliferates this focus on hadith and the life of the Prophet Muhammad as one of the most important vehicles for contemporary Muslims to learn about and understand Islamic teachings. As Daniel Brown notes in his study of the controversies around hadith and sunna (prophetic way and example) in the twentieth century, "The problem of sunna has become the most important dimension of a modern Muslim crisis of religious authority, occupying a central place in Muslim religious discourse."[135] Salafī reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries placed great importance on the sunna but were emboldened to investigate anew the judgments about the reliability and authenticity of hadith reports. "Their stress was rather on the need for more rigorous application of the traditional criteria" for evaluating hadiths.[136] By serving as "the mediators of the Prophetic legacy," Muslim religious scholars bolstered their authority with their expertise in hadith sciences.[137] Hadith scholars and transmission have faced severe challenges from the nineteenth century to the present, as Garret Davidson documents: "The social and cultural capital associated with hadith transmission" diminished in the modern period

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134 Mubārakpūrī, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in *al-Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr fī Tahdhīb Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Riyadh: Dar al-Salām, 2013), 8.

135 Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

136 Brown, 31.

137 Brown, 133.

as alternative forms of education, especially European-styled universities, proliferated in Muslim majority settings.[138] Many previously popular genres of hadith transmission suffered with "shifts in market forces and rapidly lost popularity as scholars struggled to remain relevant to their newly educated audiences."[139] There were, however, attempts to push back against this loss of regard for hadith sciences and works, including the Salafi and Ahl-i Hadith movements, which I examine in the next section. Davidson writes of a "resurgence" in the late 1990s of proponents of the importance of hadith transmissions and their networks.[140] Mubārakpūrī's works, including Ibn Kathīr's abridged hadith-focused tafsīr of the early 2000s, fit within this narrative.

Mubārakpūrī's religious education and teaching can be broadly characterized as Salafī. In India the Salafī orientation has been historically associated with the Ahle Hadith movement. Barbara Metcalf notes the influence and reach of the Ahl-i Hadis in the eastern part of the United Provinces, where Mubārakpūrī hailed from.[141] In an important recent study, Hira Amin and Azhar Majothi argue that Indian Salafism often receives scant attention, being overlooked by Arab Salafism.[142]

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138 Garrett Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Hadith Transmission across a Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 293.

139 Davidson, 294.

140 Davidson, 297.

141 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival,* 291.

142 This is especially the case, they argue, in studies on the different influences and movements in Muslim communities in Britain, including that of Salafism, which is dominated by attention to Arab influences. Hira Amin and Azhar Majothi, "The Ahl-e-Hadith: From British India to Britain," *Modern Asian Studies* (2021), 2–3. For an important exception, see Hira Amin, "Salafism and Islamism in Britain, 1965–2015" (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017).

The history of the South Asian Ahl-e-Hadith movement is tied to Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d. 1831) and his teacher, Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 1824), whose father, Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), was an influential scholar in many Islamic disciplines. Wali Allah's grandson, Shah Muhammad Ishaq Dehlawi (d. 1846), was succeeded by Sayyid Nazir Husain Dehlawi (d. 1902), who popularized teachings of this movement. Nazir Husain is noted for advocating a more hadith-centered approach over adherence to the Ḥanafī legal school (madhab). Another important figure in this movement was the Azhar-trained Sayyid Siddiq Hasan Khan (1832–1890),[143] who married Shah Jahan Begum (d. 1901), the queen of Bhopal. Khan published works in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu and emphasized a hadith-centered approach. He and other scholars from the Ahl-i Hadith movement "were at the forefront of those writing and publishing on hadith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[144]

The Ahl-i Hadith movement emphasized the texts of the Qur'an and authentic hadith, arguing against adhering to one of the madhabs. "The movement also insisted on a strict code of worshipping God without intermediaries, saintly or otherwise,"[145] which would put it in opposition to some of the popular Sufi practices. As Muhammad Qasim Zaman puts it, the Ahl-i Hadith are known for their "outright denunciation" of Sufism. From their perspective, "Sufi devotionalism

143 For a study on this influential figure, see Saedullah, *The Life and Works of Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan: Nawab of Bhopal* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1973); Claudia Preckel, "Screening Siddiq Hasan Khan's (1832–1890) Library: The Use of Hanbali Literature in 19th-Century Bhopal," in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya*, ed. Birgit Krawietz and George Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 162–219.

144 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 40. Zaman notes Khan's role in publishing and disseminating hadith works such as Ibn Ḥajar's (d. 1449) commentary on al-Bukhārī's (d. 870) *Ṣaḥīḥ* as well as the Yemeni al-Shawkani's (d. 1839) *Nayl al-awṭār*.

145 Amin and Majothi, "The Ahl-e-Hadith," 6.

has no basis in the foundational Islamic texts and it amounts practically to worshipping holy personages and therefore to the cardinal sin of setting up partners with the one God."[146] The latter act is known as "shirk"; see the next section for the difference in how the Ahl-i Hadith and Mawdudi defined the concept.

Zaman frames the contestation in South Asia between Deobandis, Barelawis, and Ahl-i Hadith as follows:

> In marked contrast with the Deobandis and the Barelawis, both of whom adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni law, the Ahl-i Hadith reject the authority of *all* such schools (*madhhabs*) and therefore of a legal tradition that has guided Muslim societies since the ninth century. To the Deobandis and the Barelawis, a Hanafi identity has meant working within the framework of the rules, norms, and methods associated with past scholars of this school of law—of submitting to their overarching authority (*taqlid*). The Ahl-i Hadith, by contrast, view taqlid as investing fallible humans with an authority that belongs only to God and the Prophet Muhammad. To them, this is not very different from the abhorrent [to them] "saint-worshipping" practices of the *pirs*—claimants to Sufi authority—and their [to them] ignorant followers. Instead, they insist on a purity of belief that replicates that of Islam's first generations, the *salaf* (hence their common designation as the Salafis), and on direct recourse to the Islamic foundational texts, as opposed to approaching those texts through the distorting lenses of a longstanding legal tradition.[147]

The Ahl-i Hadith / Salafis questioned the legal basis of many Hanafi rulings, which stimulated many Deobandi responses to these objections. [148] And while they had rejection of taqlid in common with the modernist movement of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the two differed in their embrace of Western knowledge and norms. [149] Zaman insightfully places both Deobandis and Ahl-

146 Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan*, 197–198.

147 Zaman, 18.

148 Zaman, 22.
149 Zaman, 26.

i Hadith within the context of colonialism, where "the effort to provide authoritative religious guidance to a community whose religious and cultural identity was seen as gravely threatened in the changed world of colonial rule."[150] More broadly, Brannon Ingram writes of the "Salafization of public arguments," where an appeal to citations from the Qur'an and hadith have overtaken the power of appealing to scholarly authorities, especially from within the madhabs.[151]

Members of the Ahl-i Hadith movement established relationships with Saudi scholars and hosted them in India.[152] Indian Ahl-i-Hadith scholars were instrumental in establishing seminaries in Saudi;[153] when members made their headquarters in Al-Jamia-tus-Salafiah in Varanasi, the Saudi Arabian ambassador to India, Yūsuf al-Fawzan (d. 1977), laid the foundation stone in 1963, and a student of ʻAbd al-Aziz b. Baz (d. 1999), who served as vice-chancellor of the Islamic University of Medina, inaugurated the center.[154] The university, established in 1961 (with

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150 Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 24.

151 Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 213.

152 Amin and Majothi, "The Ahl-e-Hadith," 7.

153 Amin and Majothi, 8.

154 Amin and Majothi, 8–9. Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai write of the significance of universities such as the Islamic University of Medina, where "graduates carry the ideas acquired during their education back to their home communities, and some also bring with them a reformatory zeal. . . . The significance of these universities is in their hybrid nature: they produce ʻulama through their curriculum, as inherited from the seminary tradition, while claiming a 'modern' space by adapting the formal structures of the Western university . . . . This volume argues that we should recognize the distinct potential of these universities in globalizing specific Islamic discourses for the precise reason that these institutions are state supported, and thus that studying them enables us to examine the complex interplay between states' desires to exercise global legitimacy and the emergence of global Islamic discourses" (introduction to *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa*, ed. Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 2. For a detailed study of the Islamic University of Medina and its curriculum, state sponsorship, and influence, see Mike Farquhar, "The Islamic University of Medina since 1961: The Politics of Religious Mission and the Making of a Modern Salafi Pedagogy," in Bano and Sakurai, 21–40.

Mawdudi as a founding member), drew on Ahl-e-Hadith scholars to teach thousands of students and spread Salafi teachings throughout the world. Not surprisingly, many Ahl-e-Hadith scholars were funneled into the new institutions in Saudi Arabia that championed Salafī thought and led to their further proliferation and prominence.[155] An Indian Ahl-e-Hadith scholar like Mubārakpūrī fit firmly in this network of Salafi hadith-centric scholars. With the resources of the Saudi institutions, which gained much from the oil boom of the 1960s and 1970s, Salafi/Ahl-e-Hadith ideas proliferated and reached wide audiences, including through the Saudi patronage of Ahl-i Hadith madrasas in the Punjab.[156] The publication and distribution of the Dār al-Salām Mubārakpūrī abridgment of *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, with its focus on rigorously graded authentic hadith, is a product of these networks and influences.

The difference of opinion over the word "shirk" provides a snapshot of the controversies between the commentators studied in this section. Mubārakpūrī, being fluent in Urdu and familiar with Mawdudi's ideas, publicly criticized Mawdudi for his expansive notion of "shirk," or associating partners with God. For Mawdudi, "if a government does not govern according to the law laid by Allah, then following and obeying that government would be considered as an act of worship towards the government and it is shirk." Mubārakpūrī differentiates between acts of

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155 For a study of the interactions between South Asian and Arabian Muslims, see Christophe Jaffrelot, "South Asian Muslims' Interactions with Arabian Islam until the 1990s: Pan-Islamism before and after Pakistan, in *Pan-Islamic Connections: Transnational Networks between South Asia and the Gulf*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Laurence Louer (London: C. Hurst and Co. Publishers, 2017), 21–47. For an Arabic study on Indian Ahl-e-Hadith members and their relationships with Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries, see Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Maqbūl and 'Ārif Jāwaid al-Muḥammadī, *Ahl al-Ḥadīth fī Shibh al-Qārrah al-Hindiyyah wa 'Alāqatuhum bi 'l-Mamlakah al-Su'ūdiyyah wa Ghairuhā min al-Duwal al-'Arabiyyah* (Beirut: Dar al-Bashā'ir, 2014). Thanks to Amin and Majothi for this reference.

156 Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan*, 130.

worship, which should be done solely for the sake of God, and acts of obedience to governmental authority.[157] In his understanding, shirk is limited to matters of worship and is not extended to matters of state law or government, as Mawdudi was known for.

157 Md. Jahirul Haq, "The Four Terms of the Qur'ān in the Discourse of Maudodi: An Analysis of His Methodology" (PhD diss., International Islamic University of Malaysia, 2015), 12, based on a recording by Mubārakpūrī in Urdu that was transcribed, translated into English, and posted on the Salafi website Salafitalk.net.

Chapter 3: Surah Yūsuf (Q12)

In this chapter, I present an overview of the narrative contained in the Joseph chapter of the Qur'an. I think examine the commentaries of Mawdudi, Asad, and Mubarakpuri's abridgement of Ibn Kathīr. I follow this with a brief presentation of some contemporary North American voices and their interpretation of this narrative.

Overview of Surah Yūsuf (Q12)

This sura or chapter of the Qur'an has 111 verses. In this overview, summarized verses are in parentheses. Surah Yūsuf, the twelfth in the order of the canonical Qur'anic compilation, starts with a comment about the authority of the Qur'an, asserting that the source of its narrative comes from God. Prophet Muhammad did not know this narrative before revelation (1–3). Yūsuf shares with his father, Ya'qūb (Jacob), a dream he had of eleven stars, the sun, and the moon prostrating to him. His father advises Yūsuf not to share the dream. Yūsuf's brothers plot to get rid of him by dropping him into a well. They come back to their father claiming that a wolf devoured Yūsuf (4–18). A caravan passing through discovers Yūsuf in the well; he is sold in Egypt to a figure referred to as al-'Azīz. The latter's wife tries to seduce Yūsuf, but he resists (19–29). The "women in the city" start gossiping about the wife of al-'Azīz, whereupon she calls for a banquet with them so they too can see the beauty and attraction of Yūsuf. Yūsuf prays to God for safety and declares that prison is more beloved to him than to fall into sin (30–35). Yūsuf is placed in a prison, where there are two other prisoners, whose dreams he interprets after preaching to them (36–42).

The king (*malik*) has a dream, which Yūsuf interprets (43–49). The king investigates the matter of Yūsuf's imprisonment, Yūsuf's innocence is established, and the king appoints Yūsuf as

an overseer of the storehouses of food (because there is a famine) (50–57). The brothers of Yūsuf come seeking provisions, which Yūsuf gives to them generously. But he asks them to bring their youngest brother (said to be Benjamin, although he is not named in the Qur'anic text). When the brothers return home, they discover that their payment for the food was returned to them. The father takes an oath from the brothers to protect their youngest brother, whom he only reluctantly allows to travel with them. Jacob advises his sons to enter not all together from one gate or door but, rather, through different gates. The need to place one's trust in God is affirmed (58–68).

Yūsuf reveals his identity to his (full and youngest) brother. Yūsuf keeps this brother with him through a trick whereby his brother is accused of theft. The other brothers return to their father, Ya'qūb, with the news of the loss of a second child. Ya'qūb cries and turns to God. He tells his sons to not despair but to go seek after Yūsuf and their other brother (69–87). The brothers enter again on Yūsuf, who reveals his identity, recalling what they did to him in their state of ignorance (*jāhilūn*). Yūsuf forgives them and sends a shirt for their father, whereby (according to most interpretations), he regains his sight (88–93). Yūsuf instructs them all to come to Egypt, which they do, prostrating to him, which marks the fulfillment of Yūsuf's dream, which the Qur'anic chapter began with (94–101).

Circling back to the beginning, the chapter ends with comment on those who will not believe even after witnessing the signs of God in the heavens and earth. It mentions that messengers do not ask for recompense from people (rather, their reward lies with God). It emphasizes the oneness of God, the threat of God's punishment, and the Prophet's role to preach; it invokes the messengers' patience with difficulties and rejection by their peoples. Eventually, it

asserts that God’s help comes to God’s messengers, highlighting that the stories of messengers have great lessons for those who reflect (102–111).

Mawdudi’s Commentary on Sura Yūsuf

Each Qur’anic commentator reads the verses of this chapter in a way that highlights their own concerns. Given Mawdudi’s postcolonial state building project, the story of Yūsuf brings the question of relationship with a non-Muslim king or ruler to the forefront of his examination. This invites modern Muslims to evaluate the political conditions in which they live and decide whether it is necessary to change those conditions or see them as conducive to their own contributions to and practice of Islam. For Mawdudi, to not work toward an Islamic state of governance is to severely marginalize the proper sphere of Islam. It is to domesticate it. Mawdudi does not want to cede ground to the secular, which he categorizes as “un-Islamic.” The discussion about the relationship of the state to politics and the secular has been the focus of many studies.[1] Mawdudi is primarily concerned with taking state power and forming an Islamic polity, but several other concerns figure prominently throughout his commentary—for example, imprisonment and injustice. I want to caution aganist reductionism—that is, simply seeing Mawdudi as obsessed with taking political power without giving attention to how he engages with a broad set of issues in relationship to hadith, biblical material, poetry, and Sufism, to list a few. He is clearly interested in cultivating a pious subjectivity and even sees that as a necessary step that must be taken before

1 See, for example, the works of Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Wael Hallaq.

achieving political power, for he wants pious individuals to exercise power in accordance with what he understands as submission to God's sovereignty.[2]

Mawdudi has a complicated relationship with the biblical material and contemporary research of his times, some of which he selectively invokes; others he completely dismisses. He is critical of Muslim scholars incorporating biblical material as well as of what he sees as unjustifiable imaginations and innovations, especially regarding the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykha. Texts are constantly reinterpreted by readers in their particular contexts; here we see Mawdudi grappling with questions of colonial and then modern state rule, justice, imprisonment, character, and morality, reading this Qur'anic chapter in a way that comments on these modern realities of life.

Mawdudi's commentary on Sura Yūsuf very much emphasizes the difference in character between an individual who is shaped by Islamic beliefs and teachings and one who is not. Mawdudi writes of a contrast between character that is "molded by Islam on the bedrock of the worship of Allah and accountability in the Hereafter" and character that is "molded by kufr [disbelief] and 'ignorance' on the worship of the world and disregard of Allah and the Hereafter."[3] By illustrating this contrast, Mawdudi holds that the Qur'an is asking readers to "decide for yourselves which of these two patterns you would choose."[4] Character formation is central to Mawdudi's vision for eventually capturing state power. For Mawdudi, "the greatest lesson this story teaches is that if the

2 For a study of Mawdudi's conceptualization of God's sovereignty, see Andrew March, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), particularly chapter 4, "The Sovereignty of God and the Caliphate of Man," 75–113.
3 SherAli Tareen, "Struggles for Independence: Colonial and Postcolonial Orders," in Armando Salvatore, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 528.

4 Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdudi *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān,* trans. and ed. by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1988), "Yūsuf," 2.

Believer possesses true Islamic character and is endowed with wisdom, he can conquer a whole country with the strength of his character alone."[5] Again we see Mawdudi's focus on the idea that character can transform social and political realities:

> Whereas the Prophet's own life taught the lesson that even a single Muslim could all by himself bring about the Islamic revolution in a whole country by his pure Islamic character, his Faith, intelligence and wisdom, and that a true Believer is able to conquer, by the proper use of his moral character, a whole country without any army, ammunition or moral provisions.[6]

In this evocation of character, we can see how concepts from the historical Islamic tradition are redefined or put to new uses. Concepts such as *adab* (good manners, etiquette, being refined), SherAli Tareen writes, "under the shadow of modern colonial power, . . . were infused with new meanings and epistemic coordinates."[7] Following this trajectory, character (*akhlaq)*, under Mawdudi's new usage, becomes a means for inculcating good attributes of national citizenship.

Given the political context, Mawdudi's commentary and emphasis on revolution and the changes that can be implemented in the rule and governance of one's society through character emerge directly from his political activism for the independence of India from British colonial rule and the formation of the new state of Pakistan. Mawdudi comments on the verse in which Joseph asks to be placed in a position of power in the Egyptian society of the time. Mawdudi asks,

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5 Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an,* "Yūsuf," 3.
6 Mawdudi, 45.

7 SherAli Tareen, "Struggles for Independence: Colonial and Postcolonial Orders," in Armando Salvatore (ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell History of Islam* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 530. For a study of adab in South Asian Islam, see Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

> What was the object for which Prophet Joseph made a proposal for powers in the land? Did he offer his services for the enforcement of the laws of a non-Muslim state? Or did he intend to establish the cultural, moral and political systems of Islam by taking the powers of government in his own hands?[8]

Mawdudi reads the categories of "non-Muslim state" and "systems of Islam" into the narrative of Joseph, viewing Joseph as a Muslim in an environment of non-Muslims (that is, where Islam is not implemented). Mawdudi is engaging in an act of anachronism: he imposes on Joseph's time his ideal of Islamic beliefs and their implementation as a "system" despite Joseph's story occurring prior to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and even though the Qur'an and hadith and Islamic sources do not flesh out what the teachings of Joseph or Jacob were—besides insisting on the worship of God alone, especially in the context of the idolatry of their time. Mawdudi reinterprets what idolatry consists of: not so much worshipping physical idols in addition to or instead of God but rather accepting an "un-Islamic" form of governance.

Indicating what he sees as the lesson that Muslims in his time should derive from this narrative, Mawdudi describes the reasons behind this virtuous, righteous, just prophet's interactions with his disbelieving society:

> To get an opportunity for enforcing the Commandments of Allah and for establishing truth and justice, and to gain that power which is essential for fulfilling the Mission for which the Messengers are sent. He did not make this demand for the love of kingdom or for

8 Mawdudi, "Yūsuf," 44.

> worldly pleasures and ambitions. He did this because he knew full well that there was none else who could perform that work.[9]

Mawdudi highlights a model prophet seeking to acquire worldly power not for some personal material benefit but rather to implement God's laws, injunctions, truth, and justice. Mawdudi broadens what Muslims have seen as challenging the belief in one God. Taking a king as a god would violate God's sovereignty: "To offer services to carry on the work of the un-Islamic system under the existing un-Islamic law would have been tantamount to acknowledging the king as his Lord."[10] Mawdudi's expansive view of Islamic monotheism reinterprets a core theological tenet that was traditionally interpreted in relation to divinities or deities rather than political powers or systems. Mawdudi could point to the statement of Pharoah declaring, "I am your Lord, most high" (Q79:24). As Andrew March points out, Mawdudi's novel interpretation of God's exclusive sovereignty broadens the theological notion to assert a definitive "Islamic" form of governance.[11]

Mawdudi was concerned about working under British colonial rule or Hindu majority rule and initially opposed the creation of Pakistan. Given that he wrote his chapter in 1942, five years before Indian independence and the formation of Pakistan, it would make sense that British rule was foremost on his mind, although the debates regarding the formation of a separate Muslim state were hotly debated at the time as well. Mawdudi followed the trend of thinkers in his time who saw Muslim and Hindu identities and histories as constituting "diametrically opposed civilizations

9 Mawdudi, 44.
10 Mawdudi, 45.

11 For a study of Mawdudi's conceptualization of God's sovereignty, see March, *The Caliphate of Man*, particularly chapter 4, "The Sovereignty of God and the Caliphate of Man," 75–113.

always bound for division into two separate nation-states."[12] Instead of seeing the conflict as contingent, they saw these divisions as inevitable and inherent. If Qur'anic justification can be found for supporting such a division of self-versus-other, or religious separatism, a powerful case can be provided to Muslim readers to endorse such thinking, which Mawdudi tries to supply. For example, he draws a parallel between the Egyptian treatment of Joseph and his brothers as Hebrews or non-Egyptians and the Hindu treatment of Muslims in India: "Naturally the non-Muslim Egyptians would have declared them to be foreigners just as the Hindus treat the Indian Muslims of today."[13] Providing additional context to Mawdudi, Johanna Pink writes,

> In 1947, the state of Pakistan was founded, and from the 1950s onwards, Mawdudi was politically active, trying to convert the "state for Muslims" into an "Islamic state". This development is somewhat reflected in his work on the Qur'an which is at the beginning mostly a translation with notes meant to facilitate understanding, but gradually, and with increasing frequency, adds extensive sections of commentary that discuss an Islamic lifestyle, an Islamic system of governance and any number of contemporary issues.[14]

More broadly, SherAli Tareen writes of the transformation or "transmutation" (citing Marshall Hodgson) of the project of colonial modernity as the privileging of new norms—namely, "individual autonomy over any notion of submission, of scientific rationality over emotion, of universal commitments over local ties, and perhaps most critically, by the valorization of the

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12 Tareen, "Struggles for Independence," 530.
13 Mawdudi, "Yūsuf," 52.

14 Pink, 182.

modern state as the ultimate locus of politics."[15] It is precisely in this context that Mawdudi rereads the Qur'anic text and tries to reinterpret it for a project of an "Islamic modern nation-state." Mawdudi argues from the Yūsuf narrative that there is an imperative on Muslims to take power for God's sake. In the verse regarding "dīn al-malik" (Q12:76) and its historical commentaries, Mawdudi faults Muslims for having lowered the standard expected of prophets in their retelling of the Qur'anic stories of the prophets. Mawdudi pins this on their desire to serve non-Muslim powers and their forgoing of true Islamic principles to engage in a "misinterpretation" of this important verse. He writes,

> When the Muslims came under the sway of non-Muslim governments, they wanted to serve under them, but the teachings of Islam and the patterns of their worthy forefathers stood in their way and they felt ashamed of this. So, in order to pacify their consciences, they sought refuge in this verse and by its misinterpretation thought that that great Prophet had made an application for a post to serve under a non-Muslim under un-Islamic laws.[16]

We see this focus on changing the law of the land to be "Islamic" as Mawdudi understood it. Regarding the Qur'anic phrase "fī dīn al-malik" in the Joseph chapter, Mawdudi writes,

> By using the word for the "law of the land," Allah has denoted the vast comprehension of the word (din) and this cuts at the root of the conception of din of those people who confine the scope of the Message of the Prophets to mere worship of One Allah and believe that it has nothing to do with the cultural, political, social, judicial, legal and other mundane affairs of life. Or, they opine that, if at all it [dīn] has any concern with those matters, it is merely to give some instructions of an optional nature in regard to these, and leave it to the believers to adopt these or their own man-made laws, because, they think, there is no harm even in adopting the latter course. This erroneous conception of din, which has been in vogue among the Muslims for a long time, has been responsible for rendering them neglectful of making exertions for the

15 Tareen, "Struggles for Independence," 522.
16 Mawdudi, "Yūsuf," 45.

> establishment of the Islamic Way of life. As a result of this misconception of din, they became reconciled to un-Islamic ways of unbelief and ignorance.[17]

Here, Mawdudi argues against a confinement of the proper domain of religion to acts of otherworldly piety and argues for the relevance of Islamic teachings to questions of worldly organization and politics. For him, Islamic teachings spell out all that Muslims need; there is not space for "man-made laws," even though the history of the development of Islamic law as well as the practice of *siyasa*, or governance, involves the work of human hands, even as they endeavor to interpret and hypothesize about God's will regarding concrete actions.[18]

Approach to Biblical Material

I now turn to examine another aspect of Mawdudi's commentary—namely, his position on incorporating biblical material into the Islamic tradition. Samuel Ross has argued that Qur'anic exegesis for the most part did not engage biblical material directly until the nineteenth century.[19] This is significant, considering Mawdudi's colonial and postcolonial context, which included the heavy presence and active efforts of Christian missionaries in South Asia.[20] In British India, the Muslim intelligentsia had great familiarity with biblical scholarship as they sought to respond to

17 Mawdudi, 49.

18 On *siyasa*, see Wael Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 211-6.

19 See Samuel J. Ross, "The Biblical Turn in the Qur'an Commentary Tradition" (PhD diss., Yale, 2018).

20 For one study on the effects of Christion missionaries on educational institutes in Bengal, see Parna Sengupta, *Pedagogy for Religion: Missionary Education and the Fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

Christian critiques of the Islamic faith—for example, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who wrote a commentary on the New Testament, as cited earlier.

The debate concerning the incorporation and authenticity of biblical material is long-standing.[21] For example, Ibn Taymiyya and his disciple Ibn Kathīr, both of whom I discuss extensively in part 3 of this chapter, take a very critical attitude toward biblical material, writing it off as legend that Muslim exegetes have no need of.[22] Here, I would like to briefly situate Mawdudi in relation to these debates, especially considering that Mawdudi cites Ibn Kathīr, whose *tafsir* was available to him in recent printing.

According to Mawdudi, one of the main objectives of the Qur'an and this Meccan chapter of Yūsuf is to prove that the Prophet Muhammad was a true Prophet of God, who received revelation from God and not from human interlocutors. He finds the Talmudic narrative to be "faulty" and makes the point that the Qur'an's narrative and its difference from biblical accounts

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21 For discussions about the reception of biblical material or *Isrā'īlīyāt,* see Gottfried Hagen, "From Haggadic Exegesis to Myth: Popular Stories of the Prophets in Islam," in Roberta Sterman Sabbath, ed., *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament and Qur'ān as Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 301–316; Judith Romney Wegner, "Exegetical Excursions from Judaism to Islam," in L. Ehrlich et al., eds., *Textures and Meaning: Thirty Years of Judaic Studies at the University Press of Massachusetts Amherst* (electronic publication: Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies, University Press of Massachusetts Amherst, 2004), 284–296; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and several articles in Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Muḥammad Husayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Isrā'īliyāt fī-l-tafsīr wa-l-ḥadīth* (Cairo: al-Jumhūrīyah lil- Ṣiḥāfah, 2008); and Alan Dundes, *Fables of the Ancients? Folklore in the Qur'ān* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

22 See Shabir Ally's discussion in "The Culmination of Tradition-based Tafsīr: The Qur'ān Exegesis *al-Durr al-manthūr* of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012) especially chapter 3, "Legends and Isrā'īlīyāt in al-Durr al-manthūr," 92–141. See also Walid Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of an Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis," in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2015 [2010]), 123–162.

is "a clear proof of the fact that it has no copied stories from the Israelite traditions as the pseudo-orientalists allege, but has, on the other hand, corrected them and told the real facts to the world."[23]

Mawdudi attempts to incorporate archaeological discoveries to provide chronologies, identify figures, and specify regions. This is a shift from alternative approaches to the Qur'anic narratives, which highlight the personal or universal relevance of themes or morals instead of being fixated on the facticity and quantifiable aspects of a story. In this approach, the mythos, referred to earlier in the works of Armstrong, Campbell, Eliade, and Sexton, becomes less emphasized. Mawdudi incorporates biblical literature and modern archaeological and historiographical discoveries, perhaps from his own interactions with Christian missionaries in South Asia. Mawdudi makes reference to "recent researches made by the Egyptologists," which he argues corroborate the position of "Arab historians and the commentators of the Quran" about the naming of the ruling dynasty, Amaliq, the Amalekites.[24] He points to "modern research scholars" to state that the Hyksos king was Apophis.[25]

At times, then, Mawdudi sees no problem in drawing on biblical narratives and scholarship to provide details about the Yūsuf story, such as Jacob having four wives; Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin being the offspring of one wife while the other ten brothers are from other wives (details not mentioned in the Qur'an); the regions in which the family of Jacob was believed to have lived (Hebron [in Palestine] and Shechem); and dates that are absent in the Qur'anic narrative.

23 Mawdudi, "Yūsuf," 36.
24 Mawdudi, "Yūsuf," 4.

25 Mawdudi, 4.

The extent of his scholarship and familiarity with this body of research can be disputed; I am simply pointing to the fact that Mawdudi does appeal to biblical literature and scholarship.

At other times, however, Mawdudi is quite critical of the use of biblical material. For example, he holds that the Prophet Yūsuf as portrayed in the Qur'an is a person of high character, but the biblical narrative's portrayal, at times, does not befit that of a Prophet of God.[26] Mawdudi considers "the version of the Qur'an" to be "more realistic" in relation to the actions of the Prophet Jacob, Joseph's father.[27] Regarding the biblical depiction of Joseph shaving his beard and being dazzled by the material wealth of the king, Mawdudi cannot accept this "degrading picture."[28] Mawdudi critiques Muslim scholars for incorporating biblical elements that are not confirmed by the Qur'an's narrative.[29] He writes that the Bible's version of the story is so focused on providing unnecessary details that it is "void of those things that teach moral values and throw light on the real characters and the Mission of the Prophets."[30]

Mawdudi uses the term "nationalist movement" to describe the ousting of the Amalekites by "a very bigoted dynasty of Copts."[31] Mawdudi critiques "the editors of the Bible" for "erroneously" calling the Hyksos king "Pharaoh" under "the misunderstanding that all kings of Egypt were 'Pharaohs.'" The Qur'anic narrative calls the ruler in the chapter of Joseph "king"

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26 Mawdudi, 31.

27 Mawdudi, 32.

28 Mawdudi, 41.

29 See, for example, Mawdudi, 33.

30 Mawdudi, 54.

31 Mawdudi, 54.

(malik), while in the stories of Moses, Fir'awn (Pharaoh). Mawdudi again draws from the Bible to write about an oath Joseph made regarding where he was to be buried, which is not found in the Qur'anic narrative. Mawdudi writes, "Though the story of Prophet Joseph as given in the Quran differs very much in its serial from that given in the Bible and the Talmud, the Three generally agree in regard to its component parts. We shall explain the differences, when and where necessary, in our Explanatory Notes." Mawdudi, in contrast with some medieval Qur'anic commentators, has access to a library of biblical material as well as contemporary studies. Mawdudi cites this material approvingly in many cases but also disagrees with certain portrayals as not fitting the lofty standards he ascribes to individuals who are supposed to be moral exemplars as prophets and messengers of God.

Gender

I now turn to a curious element in Mawdudi's commentary on Sura Yūsuf—namely, his views on how Zulaykha, the wife of the 'Azīz (the wife of Potiphar in the Bible), is portrayed as a temptress. Mawdudi's reading, I show, is in contrast with Sufi literature, such as that by the medieval Persian scholar and poet Jami, who reads the narrative as stages of love and longing—that is, in much more positive rather than condemning tones. The *Study Qur'an* makes reference to this Islamicate literature,[32] as does the contemporary Sufi teacher, Imam Fode Drame in his talks on this narrative, which I look at at the end of this chapter. Mawdudi takes issue with Muslim

[32] The Study Quran: A New Translation With Notes and Commentary, eds., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, (New York: HarpersOne, 2015), 590.

traditions that gave rise to the idea that Zulaykha, who attempts to seduce Yūsuf, later marries Yūsuf. He writes,

> As regards the other tradition among the Muslims that Prophet Joseph married her afterwards, it is neither based on the Qur'an nor on the history of the Israelites. And the fact is that it is below the dignity of a Prophet to have married such a woman about whom he had personal knowledge that she was of a bad character. And this opinion is confirmed by this general statement of the Qur'an: "Women of bad character are for men of bad character and men of bad character are for women of bad character. And the women of pure character are for men of pure character, and the men of pure character for the women of pure character.... " (XXIV : 26.)[33]

Mawdudi excludes the possibility of Zulaykha's redemption and repentance and writes off the poetry and other extra-Qur'anic accounts of the Islamicate literary tradition as unworthy of his ideal of lofty character and morals. Further elaborations, such as accounts of "the conversation that took place between Prophet Joseph and Zuleikha in the first night of their marriage," are for Mawdudi "mere fiction."[34] His dismissals fall in line with Shahab Ahmed's argument that the multiple registers of engaging with Qur'anic meaning, such as Jami's love poetry on Yūsuf and Zulaykha, become severely truncated in the modern period, with its increased concern for "authenticity" and purity of sources. Ahmed specifically refers to the rich literature in Persian and other Islamic vernaculars on the love story of Yūsuf and Zulaykha that seem to have become marginalized in modern Islam, such as in Mawdudi's purist modernist formulation.[35]

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[33] Mawdudi, 33

34 Mawdudi, 50.

35 Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 305–308. For examples of the rich Yūsuf and Zulaykha literature, see *Yūsuf and Zulaykha: A Poem by Jami* [1414–1492], *Translated from the Persian into English Verse by Ralph T. H. Griffith* (London: Trubner & Co., 1882); Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yūsuf: Whose 'Best Story'?," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 20, no. 4 (Nov. 1997), 485–508. See also the following three chapters from *Jāmī in Regional Contexts: The Reception of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's Works in the Islamicate World, ca. 9th/15th–14th/20th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): Thibaut d'Hubert, "Foundational Maḥabbat-nāmas: Jāmī's Yūsuf u Zulaykhā in

Furthermore, Mawdudi cannot accept the line of redemption in the Qur'anic narrative. When Joseph has his name cleared before coming out of prison, through the testimony of the women and the confession of Zulaykha to her misdeed, the Qur'anic verse is ambiguous as to who the speaker is, Zulaykha or Yūsuf: "I did this so that he may know that I did not betray him in his absence, and that Allah does not allow the design of the treacherous to succeed" (Q12:52). This and the next verse are particularly important in some manuals of Sufism as they invoke the notion of the ego or carnal self that calls to evil (*al-nafs al-ammara bil-su'*).

However, Mawdudi critiques Ibn Taymiyya for "missing" that "her confession in v. 51 fits in with her low character, but obviously the succeeding dignified and grand speech in v. 52 is too high for her."[36] Mawdudi argues, "Therefore one cannot ascribe such a pure speech to the wife of Al-'Aziz unless there is a clear clue showing that by the time she had repented and believed and mended her ways, but there is no such clue. Thus it is clear that this speech must have been made by Prophet Joseph (Allah's peace be upon him)."[37] Interestingly, Mawdudi passionately argues that the woman in the Joseph story remains at fault; he is not willing to allow any sort of redemption for her. In contrast, the Persian scholar Jami of the premodern polyvalent tradition with multiple levels of reading that Shahab Ahmed presents, had no such hang-ups; instead of seeing the Zulaykha character as a sinning temptress, he reimagines her as a lover in search of divine and human love that ultimately is fruitful and validated, even though none of this is strictly narrated in

Bengal" (ca. 16th–19th AD), 649–691; Ayesha A. Irani, "Love's New Pavilions: Śāhā Mohāmmad Chagīr's Retelling of Yūsuf va Zulaykhā in Early Modern Bengal," 692–751; and C. Ryan Perkins, "A Bounty of Gems: Yūsuf u Zulaykhā in Pashto," 777–797.

36 Mawdudi, 43.

37 Mawdudi, 43.

the Qur'anic chapter.[38] Shahab Ahmed laments the loss of such readings and the lack of authority given to such literature in modern Islam by both Muslims and Western Islamicist academics.

Commenting on sexual mores, Mawdudi collapses time in constructing a parallel between the "moral conditions of the Egyptian society of that period" and those in his own time: "It appears that the women in general and the 'ladies' of high society in particular, enjoyed almost the same sexual freedom as is rampant today in the 'civilized' West and in the Westernized East."[39] In his eyes, both types are to be condemned for their lack of restraint in modesty, but both also experience circumstances that God places faithful believers in to be tested and undergo training or *tarbiyya*. To better appreciate some of Mawdudi's choices and postures, his exegesis can be read in the context in which it was written.[40]

Imprisonment and Politics

Another aspect of Mawdudi's commentary on Sura Yūsuf shows how his writing is intimately tied to his own life and context. Mawdudi's political activism had severe consequences; like Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), part of Mawdudi's Qur'anic commentary was written in prison. Thus, it is unsurprising that Mawdudi sees a parallel between the Joseph narrative and his own time

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[38] Ahmed describes Jami's text as one that "creatively and exploratively assimilates, re-imagines, re-configures, re-presents, re-formulates, re-valorizes, and re-tells the story, such as the celebrated and prodigiously circulated poem of Jami on the story of Yūsuf (Joseph) and Zulaykha (the biblical Potiphar's wife)." He notes how popular and widely disseminated this creative retelling of the narrative in the poem was. In the strongest terms possible, he states, "Not to conceptualize human and historical Islam in terms of the *constitutive primacy* of texts such as Jami's *Yūsuf va Zulaykha* is to *misread* Islam." Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?,* 305-6.
39 Mawdudi, 35.

40 In a related time and context, one can look at Barbara Metcalf's study on Ali Ashraf Thanvi's (1863–1943) manual *Perfecting Women* (Bahishti Zewar) and how Victorian norms were incorporated into a Deobandi Sufi manual for women, even as it posed as being anti-Western and anti-colonial. See Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Alī Thanawi's Bihishti zewar: A partial translation with commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). Thanvi also has an Urdu commentary on the Qur'an called *Bayan ul Qur'an*.

regarding imprisonment of the innocent. Mawdudi criticizes the modern-day political authorities for imprisoning in the name of lofty ideals such as democracy, but in fact betrays such ideals:

> Incidentally, this shows that imprisonment of innocent people without trial and due procedure of law is as old as "civilization" itself. The dishonest rulers of today are not so much different from the wicked rulers who governed Egypt some four thousand years ago. The only difference between the two is that they did not imprison people in the name and for the cause of "democracy" but they committed unlawful acts without any pretext of law. On the contrary, their modern descendants make use of the specious pretenses of honesty when they are acting unjustly. They first enact the necessary unlawful laws to justify their unlawful practices and then "lawfully" imprison their victims. That is to say, the Egyptian rulers were honest in their dishonesty and did not hide the fact that they were imprisoning people to safeguard their own interest to ward off the "danger" they feel from them, but proclaim to the world that their victims are a menace to the country and the community. In short, they were mere tyrants but these are shameless liars as well.[41]

Mawdudi praises the Egyptian rulers of Joseph's narrative for being just. He contrasts this with what he sees as the modern-day facade of being just while using the legal system to unjustly imprison dissidents. Mawdudi, concerned about the larger infrastructure of society, is repulsed by the move to limit and domesticate the sphere of religion to a private one. He sees a critique of the system as being part of what interpreting the Islamic message means in his day, and he utilizes his commentary on this Qur'anic chapter to make this point.

Mawdudi spent about five years imprisoned on four occasions between 1948 and 1967 due to state opposition to his political activity.[42] He and "five leading religious figures" were jailed for protesting the Pakistani state taking the authority to declare the start and end of Ramadan without consulting the ulema. Any reporting of their imprisonment was censured by the government.[43] In

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41 Mawdudi, 38.

42 See https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sayyid_Abul_A%27la_Maududi.

43 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 72.

this connection, the state was ready to "crush the Mullahs, first by taking on all the Mullahs who speak against the Government."[44] He also received a death sentence that was commuted to life imprisonment by a martial law court in 1953 for his political writings, which were seen as seditious.

Concluding Remarks on Mawdudi's Commentary on Sura Yūsuf

For Mawdudi, to not work for an Islamic state of governance is to severely marginalize the proper sphere of Islam. It is to domesticate it. He does not want to cede ground to this conception of "the secular," which he categorizes as "un-Islamic." The relationship of the state to politics and the secular has been the focus of many studies. I highlight that texts are constantly reinterpreted by readers in their own contexts; here we see Mawdudi grappling with questions of colonial and then modern state rule, justice, imprisonment, character, and morality, and he reads the Qur'anic chapter in a way to comment on these realities. The story of Yūsuf and the question of his relationship to a non-Muslim king or ruler is an interesting place to examine modern Muslims' political conditions and whether it is necessary to change those conditions or see them as conducive to their own contributions to and practice of Islam. Mawdudi has a complicated relationship with the biblical material and contemporary research of his time, some of which he selectively invokes; others of which he dismisses. He is critical of Muslim scholars' incorporating biblical material and other unjustifiable imaginations and innovations into Islamic tradition, especially regarding the story of Yūsuf and Zulaykha. In his writing about imprisonment and injustice, Mawdudi is primarily concerned with taking state power and forming an Islamic polity, but several other

44 Zaman, 72.

concerns figure prominently throughout his commentary. Part of the reductionism that I want to caution away from is seeing Mawdudi simply as obsessed with taking political power, without giving attention to how he is engaging in a broad set of issues in relationship to hadith, biblical material, poetry, and Sufism, to list a few. He is clearly interested in cultivating a pious subjectivity and even sees that as necessary before taking political power, for he wants pious individuals to exercise power in accordance with what he understands as submission to God's sovereignty.[45]

As a modernist, Mawdudi shared the belief that "the revolutionary potential of the original moment of revelation had been buried and stagnated under the rubble of what they saw as 'medieval scholastic' debates over matters bearing little contemporary relevance."[46] Rather than subjecting the text to "obscure legal and theological debates," the Qur'an is to be read and "concretely put into action."[47] Mawdudi is keen to point out the modern relevance of the Qur'anic narrative of Yūsuf through highlighting teachings on subjects such as the importance of character, judging according to God's rules, and political oppression and lack of social justice. Society, in his view, has taken on degraded morals, especially concerning gender relations, which he ties back to the aristocratic norms of Egyptian society in the time of Yūsuf. According to Mawdudi, historical Muslim scholarship deserves critique for its complacency in not challenging the norms of un-Islamic behavior. A new revivalist movement is necessary for religious reform, which he seeks to provide guidelines for and lead.

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45 For a study of Mawdudi's conceptualization of God's sovereignty, see March, *The Caliphate of Man*, particularly chapter 4, "The Sovereignty of God and the Caliphate of Man," 75–113.

46 Tareen, "Struggles for Independence," 533.

47 Tareen, 535.

Muhammad Asad's Commentary on Sura Yūsuf

In part 1, I provided an outline of the Qur'an's Chapter of Joseph. In this part, I will focus on themes in Muhammad Asad's commentary that indicate some of his concerns.

Miracles

Most commentators and translators of the Qur'an hold that Yūsuf's father, Ya'qūb (Jacob), literally became blind from excessive crying over sadness at the loss of his beloved son. Toward the conclusion of the narrative, Jacob miraculously regains his sight, according to the reading of most, when Joseph sends his shirt (Arabic *qamīṣ*) to his father via his brothers. As a modernist, Asad critiques classical exegetes for getting lost in embellishments and supposed historic contexts of verses or narrations and losing what he views as the true message of the Qur'an. He is also willing to draw from modern disciplines to supplement his viewpoints. In Asad's commentary and translation on the Qur'an, regarding the issue of Jacob's eyes turning white, instead of evoking a supernatural occurrence or miracle at the hands of Yūsuf, Asad highlights an interpretation that does not assert that Jacob actually became blind and then regained his sight: "There is no compelling reason to assume that Jacob had become really blind from grief."[48] Asad has classical exegetical support for his position; for example, the rationalist 'Ash'ari Razi cited two opinions, the first (and preferred) of which is that the eyes turning white from sadness meant that crying overtook Jacob; the second is that Jacob actually turned blind from crying.49 Without knowing the classical source for Asad's position, a reader may be quick to see Asad as merely being shaped

48 Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān: The Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Translation* (Bristol, England: The Book Foundation, 2003), 394n93.

49 Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Bahiyya al-Miṣriyya, 1938), 18:195–196.

by his modern sensibilities to argue for a more rationalist reading. However, closer investigation reveals that Asad's position had grounding in premodern sources.

Emphasizing Ethical Teachings

What is most important for Asad are the Qur'an's ethical and moral teachings. Language is inherently limited, and metaphors are used to convey a sense of the majesty of that which deals with the Divine. Where he can, Asad draws from classical exegetes to highlight this metaphorical interpretation of Qur'anic narratives as opposed to seeing them as historical facts or events, or narrations that should be taken literally. This manifests in his interpretation of miracles attributed to the prophets in the Qur'an, as well as prophecies about the end times, which he reads as preoccupation with materialism and worldliness represented by figures such as the Dajjal (sometimes translated as the "Antichrist" or the "Imposter").[50]

Asad is concerned with providing abstract principles and moral guidance from the narratives of the Qur'an as opposed to seeing these narratives as necessarily rooted in historical events or facts.[51] Asad's project is an "attempt to explicate the 'mythic' language of scripture as embodied in certain sacred stories/miracles which for Asad have a purely metaphorical signification."[52] Miraculous events are also interpreted as symbolic, as metaphors for spiritual realities that human language cannot adequately capture. Drawing on Mircea Eliade, and William Paden, Abidin Chande notes, "The Truth in religious language or representation is conveyed by

50 Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'ān: Muhammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1: 86.

51 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, vii.

52 Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'ān," 80.

means of symbols which may take the form of sacred stories or models. These sacred stories are known as myths and serve a prototypical function by presenting inspiring models of great accomplishments."[53]

Asad also elaborates on the centrality of the moral principle of placing trust in God as a central theme of the Qur'anic narrative: "Namely, that 'judgment as to what is to happen rests with none but God', and that 'all who have trust [in His existence] must place their trust in Him alone' (verse 67): the twin ideas which underlie the whole of this *sūrah*, and which Jacob now seeks to impress upon his sons."[54]

Qur'anic Coherence

Another theme that Asad can be said to be especially concerned about is finding coherence and unity in the Qur'anic chapters, as opposed to seeing them as random, disparate segments, artificially forced together. As shown in the section on Mawdudi and his teachers, Farahi and the contemporary Islahi, this has been a prominent theme for Muslim writers on the Qur'an, which is significant because it appears that they feel pressure to "prove" that the Qur'an is a coherent "book" or "scripture," with the reference point being the Christian Bible, with its chronology of humanity "from the beginning." Asad writes, "The whole of this sūrah might be described as a series of variations on the theme 'judgement [as to what is to happen] rests with none but God', explicitly enunciated only in verse 67, but running like an unspoken leitmotif throughout the story of Joseph."[55]

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53 Chande, 79.

54 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 393n87.

55 Asad, 376.

This notion of coherence is, of course, framed against the view—often espoused by Western writers on the Qur'an both at the time of and before Asad's writings—that the verses in the Qur'an seem like a mixed jumble, with nothing to do with one another.[56] In the context of this criticism, the chapter of Joseph is particularly useful to those familiar with the biblical story to show a sequential narrative. Contemporary observers have also sought to find a ring structure in the chapter, as can be seen in Jawad Qureshi's article, where instead of looking for linear chronology, one can notice how a Qur'anic chapter such as Sura Yūsuf has outer and inner rings that correspond with one another.[57] All of this is in line with trying to make the case for the Qur'an being coherent and logical and in conformity with the dictates or expectations of "reason."

Rationality

Asad partially agrees with Mawdudi in emphasizing rationality. Asad was an admirer of the Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh, who thought "the modern colonial order demanded from Muslims the reinvigoration of the Qur'an's foundational principles and spirit of rational inquiry."[58] 'Abduh believed that Islam uniquely addressed the "rational mind," and he critiqued Muslims of his time for falling short of inquiry into the Qur'an and its encouragement to investigate and seek knowledge without limits instead of resorting to mere devotional reading.[59] Indicative of this emphasis on rationality and critical thinking, Asad interacted with a disciple of 'Abduh,

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56 Carlyle, for example.

57 Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Ring Composition in Sūrat Yūsuf (Q12)," *Journal International Qur'anic Studies Association* (IQSA) 2 (2017): 149–168.

58 Tareen, "Struggles for Independence," 533.

59 'Abduh, cited by Charles Kurzman, ed., *Modernist Islam 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59, in Tareen, "Struggles for Independence," 533.

Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi (1881–1945), whom he describes as "a keen, critical thinker. He never failed to impress upon me that the Muslims of recent times had fallen very short indeed of the ideals of their faith, and that nothing could be more erroneous than to measure the potentialities of Muhammad's measures by the yardstick of present-day Muslim life and thought."[60] For Asad and Maraghi, Muslim scholars were guilty of merely consuming the works of previous scholarship but not actually "digesting" them, thus leading to mere repetition instead of creativity.[61]

A shift can be traced in the approach to the Qur'anic text as "a sequence of events defined by actual time and place," such as that exemplified in the transmission-based works of Qur'anic commentary by Tabari and Ibn Kathīr, to a "history of divine paradigms, lessons, examples, admonitions, 'signs'."[62] The latter manifests prominently in the approach of 'Abduh, whom Asad read closely. 'Abduh and, in turn, Asad are both informed by the premodern or medieval rationalist al-Razi, who sought to derive the "spiritual and paradigmatic message and meaning of the Qur'anic tales."[63]

Asad's approach to rationality can be seen in his treatment of dreams. Dreams are explicitly mentioned in the chapter of Yūsuf at multiple points: Yūsuf's dreams in the beginning, in the prison, and at the end, when the initial dream is actualized, and the dream of the king. Asad was critical of the Sufis he encountered in Cairo;[64] perhaps in contrast to Sufis who give much weight

60 Asad, *Road to Mecca*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 188.

61 Asad, 189.

62 Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17.

63 Stowasser, 17.

64 Asad, *Road to Mecca*, 197.

to dreams and their interpretations, Asad renders the term *ta'wīl al-āḥādīth* in the Yūsuf narrative (normally understood as referring to the meaning of dreams) to have a broader interpretation: dreams are to "impart unto thee some understanding of the inner meaning of happenings" (Q12:6). For Asad, dreams have a more abstract or rational purpose of logic and reason rather than merely being something not under human control. Asad's almost obsessive emphasis on reason leads him to marginalize any importance given to dreams and emotions; he favors a strict "rationalist" approach, using cold reason in the quest for principles that can serve as guidance "in all times."

Asad acknowledges that contemporary readers of the Qur'an are "raised in a different religious and psychological climate" than its original audience.[65] He argues for a type of "universality from particularity": Commenting on the second verse of Surah Yūsuf, he writes, "although they [these verses] were in the first instance addressed to the Arabian contemporaries of the Prophet, these two verses apply to all people, whatever their origin, who understand the Arabic language."[66] Thus, in contrast to Ibn Kathīr and Mawdudi, who seek out historical specificities and details to flesh out aspects of the Yūsuf narrative, Asad focuses on abstract principles and lessons for contemporary audiences. Martin Kramer writes that Asad "had argued for a rational Islam; he had sought to reconcile Islamic teachings and democracy; he had tried to make the Qur'an speak to modern minds." Kramer argues for the continuation of trends prevalent in Reform Judaism in Asad's project, writing that for Asad, "Islam provided the last chance to achieve that ideal—the

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65 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an,* viii–x.

66 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 377.

reform of a religion of law so that it could be made to live in a modern age, as a liberal force of continuing faith."[67]

Susannah Heschel has drawn attention to a number of German Jewish scholars who were instrumental to the study of Islam in Europe from the 1830s to the 1930s. As she notes:

> Rather than projecting Islam as the "other" from which they wished to distinguish themselves, these early Jewish scholars of Islam tended to identify Islam with Judaism as two rational religions that they sometimes called "ethical monotheism," emphasizing the tolerance and intellectually stimulating environment created for Jews under Muslim rule during the Middle Ages, in contrast to Christian rule…. In identifying Judaism with Islam, European Jews promoted both as rational religions of strict monotheism, rejection of anthropomorphism, and adherence to an ethical religious law.[68]

Asad first read the Qur'an in the 1920s in French and German translations,[69] relying on "European orientalist works." Muzaffar Iqbal notes that the European Orientalist works on the Qur'an that dominated that time were by Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), Theodor Noldeke (1836–1930), and Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921).[70]

While Mawdudi does not cite the kalam-based medieval exegete Razi, Asad does so extensively, which makes sense: for the rationally minded, the medieval kalam debates and

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67 Martin Kramer, "The Road from Mecca: Muhammad Asad (born Leopold Weiss)," in *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1999), 243.

68 Susannah Heschel, "The Philological Uncanny: Nineteenth-Century Jewish Readings of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 20, no. 3 (2018): 206.

69 Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Making of a Free Thinker of Islam (Part I): Muhammad Asad: The Pakistan Years," *Islamic Sciences* 14, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 8, citing Asad, *Road to Mecca,* 128.

70 Iqbal, 8.

tradition provide a bridge for sophisticated intellectual debates. Some activist-oriented commentaries do not have the patience for delving into these scholastic debates, or at least they wonder what the relevance of that scholasticism is for the modern reader. Asad, however, who seeks to present a consistent theological, rational understanding of the Qur'an and what it can offer modern readers, finds drawing from this kalam tradition valuable.

Asad argues that Islam is supremely rational and logic, especially in contrast with Christian dogmas and any religion's practices of asceticism, monasticism, or exclusive otherworldliness. He argues that the call of Islam is to have a fulfilling life, in harmony with "nature," wherein the concerns of this world and the hereafter are both cultivated. As a rational system, Islam appeals against the necessity of "incomprehensible dogmas":

> To attain the supreme goal of life, man is, in Islam, not compelled to renounce the world; no austerities are required to open a secret door to spiritual purification; no pressure is exerted upon the mind to believe incomprehensible dogmas in order that salvation be secured. Such things are utterly foreign to Islam: for it is neither a mystical doctrine nor a philosophy. It is simply a programme of life according to the rules of Nature which God has decreed upon His creation.[71]

Asad on the Qur'an's Differences from the Bible

In considering Asad's travels among Muslim populations and his readings in classical and modern exegesis, it is difficult to assess to what extent he drew on Western scholarship on Islam,

71 Muhammad Asad, *The Spirit of Islam* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1984 [1980, 1979]), 8. Reprint of *Islam at the Crossroads,* (Dalhousie, Punjab: Arafat Publications; sole agent: Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore, 1947).

which was a burgeoning field in Western Europe, especially by Jewish scholars in Germany in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.[72] Asad was educated in the biblical narratives, having been tutored as a young boy in the study of the Hebrew Bible, Targum, Talmud, Mishna, and Gemarra.[73] By his own account, he was quite fluent in Hebrew by the age of thirteen and was well versed enough in rabbinical studies to note the differences between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.[74] Later in life, when penning his Qur'an commentary, Asad gave considerable attention to the differences and similarities in the biblical and Qur'anic narratives.

In the Joseph narrative, Asad notes both similarities to and differences from the Bible. He writes, "But what distinguishes the Qur'anic treatment of the story in a deeper sense is its spiritual tenor: contrary to the Bible … the Qur'ān uses it primarily as an illustration of God's unfathomable direction of men's affairs."[75] He highlights a number of differences from the biblical account about the husband (al-'Azīz) believing the false accusations against Joseph,[76] contrary to the biblical account. Asad writes: "This extremely plausible explanation contrasts sharply with the Biblical account of this incident (Genesis xliv), according to which the false accusation was part of an inexplicable 'stratagem' devised by Joseph."[77] In summary, according to Asad, the Qur'anic narrative is more consistent with a logical, rational basis as opposed to being mired with

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72 Heschel, "The Philological Uncanny," 193–213.

73 Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 227.

74 Kramer, 227.

75 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, 378n9.

76 Asad, 381n25 and 390n70.

77 Asad, 390n72.

inconsistencies or notions that are not fit for the moral examples that prophetic narratives are supposed to provide.

Ibn Kathīr's Commentary on Sura Yūsuf as Abridged by Mubarakpūrī

Mubarakpūrī's commentary on the chapter of Yūsuf appears in the fifth volume of this ten-volume set; each volume is approximately six hundred pages. The publication features the Arabic of the Qur'an, an English translation of the Qur'an verses , and then the abridged commentary with footnotes, most often referencing Ṭabarī (which, as mentioned earlier, is transmission focused) or some other hadith works. The section on Sura Yūsuf runs ninety-five pages (134–229). The Arabic is provided both for the Qur'anic verses and for the hadith narrations, which is significant: the Arabic text is thought by the publishers to be important to provide even in a work of translation for English readers. This approach emphasizes Arabic as the language of authentic Islamic teachings and sources; it also prizes Tabari as an authoritative collection of narrations: at least in the Mubarakpūrī selection of Ibn Kathīr, the assumption is that the selections from Tabari and any other sources presented in the abridged translation have been checked and graded to be of the most sound or rigid hadith authentication.

The Qur'an's Relationship with the Bible

Ibn Kathīr emphasizes that the Qur'an supersedes the authority of biblical or other scriptures and any other source of knowledge. In the commentary on Sura Yūsuf (Q12:2), the second verse is seen as praising the Qur'an "and demonstrates that it is sufficient from needing all books beside it."[78] As for the relationship of Muslims to the Bible, a hadith concerning the notable

78 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr* (abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpūrī) (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), 5:135.

Companion and second caliph, ‘Umar, is provided: ‘Umar sought to read from the Bible, but this angered the Prophet Muhammad, who appealed to his own authority and presence among his followers, and stated that were Moses alive today, he would follow Muhammad.[79]

Another example where Ibn Kathīr asserts the authority of the Qur’an over that of the Bible is at the end of the Qur’anic Joseph chapter, when Joseph welcomes his *walidayhi*, usually translated and understood as his two parents, mother and father; Ibn Kathīr acknowledges the opinion that the female individual referred to here was actually his maternal aunt, as his mother had died long ago. This would be in line with the biblical narrative, in which Rachel, the mother of Joseph, has also passed away. However, Ibn Kathīr states, giving precedence to the Qur’anic text over biblical narratives that affirm the idea of Rachel’s death: “His father and mother were both alive. There is no evidence that his mother had died before then. Rather, the apparent words of the Qur’ān testify that she was alive.”[80] This is an example of not considering the biblical narrative as authoritative, especially when it apparently contradicts the literal meaning of the Qur’an.

These issues regarding how to view the Bible are significant because the relationship of Muslims to other religious traditions has been an issue of concern and controversy among contemporary Western Muslims. It has been the source of controversy, especially as the proponents of *The Study Qur’an* have advocated a more ecumenical position, wherein salvation is

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79 These hadiths are cited to the *Musnad* of Aḥmad.

80 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 5:211.

conceptualized as extended to faithful or righteous adherents of other religious traditions.[81] It is significant to point out that such narrations where the Prophet Muhammad expresses disapproval of reading the Bible features prominently in the Darussalam abridgment of Ibn Kathīr, without apology or any notes or disclaimers. Indeed, it is almost the first point made in the chapter of Joseph.

Other details that do not appear in the Qur'anic text but are probably borrowed from the biblical literature are the names of Joseph's brothers, such as that of the eldest brother[82] and the brother (Yahūdhā) who brings the good news of Yūsuf being alive to Jacob. The Qur'anic narrative itself does not give these details. Their presence in the original fourteenth-century work indicates some familiarity and openness to "borrowing" from / referencing the biblical literature, despite the apparently explicit condemnation in the narration cited at the beginning of the chapter. Walid Saleh draws attention to this important aspect of Qur'anic-biblical commentary in his study of the fifteenth-century "Muslim Hebraist," which has a larger history outside the scope of my investigation here.[83] It is interesting that although the Darussalam version explicitly states its goal of expunging such biblical elements, condemning them as "Isrā'iliyyāt" (deemed to be of dubious value), the biblical material is almost unavoidable in the exegetical tradition; it is so rampant that it finds its way into the "authentic" abridged work. Barbara Stowasser notes that "it is in nineteenth

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81 For scholarship about notions of salvation and other religious traditions in premodern and modern Islam, see Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Mohammad Hassan Khalil, ed., *Between Heaven and Hell*: *Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

82 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 5:197.

83 Walid A. Saleh, "A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqāʿī and His Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qurʾān," *Speculum* 83, no. 3 (July 2008): 629–654.

century modernist exegesis that we find a full-scale rejection of isra'iliyyat traditions."[84] The term has "come to mean any kind of medieval 'lore,' from the phantastic, scurrilous, or merely legendary to the paradigmatic no longer in tune with modern doctrine."[85]

Despite this effort to excise the biblical material from the exegetical traditions, details that are not mentioned in Qur'anic narrative still find their way into Ibn Kathīr's commentary. These include the following: The language spoken by Joseph and his brothers (Aramaic).[86] The description of what Joseph's brothers did after they were out of their father's sight: "They then started abusing Yūsuf verbally, by cursing, and harming him by beating";[87] Joseph is thrown to the "bottom of the well";[88] after leaving Joseph there or selling him to the caravan, "they slaughtered a sheep. … But, they forgot to tear the shirt";[89] after their sale of Joseph, the brothers "divided the *Dirhams* among themselves, each getting two Dirhams."[90] The description of when Joseph seeks to escape from the seduction/desires of the wife of the 'Azīz, Zulaykha (Ibn Kathīr does not give this name): "Yūsuf was about to beat her."[91]

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84 Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 24.

85 Stowasser, 24. For fuller studies on the topic of Isra'iliyyat, see Gordon D. Newby, "Tafsir Isra'iliyyat," *Journal of the American Academy of* Religion 47, no. 4S (1979): 685–697; Marilyn Robinson Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an, *The Muslim* World 75 (1985); Reuven Firestone, *Journey in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), esp. 3–21.

86 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 5:153.

87 Ibn Kathīr, 5:145.

88 Ibn Kathīr, 5:146.

89 Ibn Kathīr, 5:147.

90 Ibn Kathīr, 5:149.
91 Ibn Kathīr, 5:154.

In general, all these details, which are not in the Qur'anic text, are probably provided to flesh out the story and to provide a continuous narrative. Ibn Kathīr appears to be comfortable with drawing from biblical material; it quite difficult to completely expunge this material in the abridgment, even with its Salafi commitments.

Another fascinating area where Ibn Kathīr's exegetical work expands on or richly colors the Qur'anic narrative is in his provision of details about what prevented Yūsuf from acting on his desire for the wife of the 'Azīz. Ibn Kathīr's abridgment mentions various positions, even while not considering them to be authoritative. However, just mentioning them is significant: they are acknowledged as opposed to being completely expunged. Their mention and inclusion as opinions, ironically, gives them an afterlife, as Walter Benjamin and Jan Asmann have theorized, and this makes them part of the "dam of tradition." The positions that Ibn Kathīr mentions without support are in the following statement: "This evidence might have been the image of Ya'qūb (Jacob), or the image of an angel, or a divine statement that forbade him from doing that evil sin, etc. There are no clear proofs to support any of these statements in specific, so it should be left vague, as Allāh left it."[92] As James Kugle documents, this idea of Jacob's image appearing to Joseph at the time of the attempted seduction is found in extrabiblical Jewish literature.[93]

Ibn Kathīr also acknowledges differences regarding the identity of the witness in verse 26 ("and one of her household bore witness"). The Qur'an only mentions that someone bore witness, but Ibn Kathīr's commentary attempts to identify this witness: "There is a difference of opinions over the age and gender of the witness mentioned here … bearded man, adult male, king's

92 Ibn Kathīr, 5:154.

93 James Kugle, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 259.

entourage, adult male"[94] or "a babe in the cradle"[95] or a "young boy who lived in the 'Azīz's house."[96] In the case of the baby, this would be another assertion of a miraculous intervention, which Ibn Kathīr and Mubarakpūrī do not seem to have a problem with, in contrast to Asad's rational interpretations.

History and Specificity

In his commentary, we see Ibn Kathīr as a medieval historian concerned with establishing specific quantities or identifying specific numerical and geographic contours of the Qur'anic narratives. Ibn Kathīr can be seen as abridging the voluminous work of Tabari (his works of universal history as well as his tradition-based Qur'anic commentary).[97] This historical approach is noteworthy in that it contrasts with other ways of reading the text (such as that discussed in the section on Muhammad Asad) that emphasize looking for parables and more universal or abstract motifs and themes that may be applicable across time and space. Ibn Kathīr is keen to give specific numbers. For example, "Yūsuf's vision became a reality forty years later, or as some say, eighty years."[98] Similarly, the idea that Joseph stayed in prison for "several" years is spelled out in the

94 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 5:157.

95 Ibn Kathīr, 5:158.

96 Ibn Kathīr, 5:158.

97 Stowasser notes that "the clearest example of interconnectedness of history writing and Qur'anic exegesis is provided in Tabari, who authored the world history quoted above and also a voluminous tafsir" (*Women in the Qur'an*, 16).
98 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 5:137.

commentary as meaning a number between three and nine,[99] and a narration is provided wherein the number of years he spent in prison is given as specifically seven.[100]

Some examples of Ibn Kathīr's focus on details in geography include the mention of how the brothers of Joseph came "out of the desert, for they lived a Bedouin life and raised cattle, according to Ibn Jurayj and others. He also said that they used to live in the Arava, Ghur area of Palestine, in Greater Syria."[101] Footnotes from the editors identify this as the Shām area and mention Canaan as the place where Joseph and his brothers came from. This may seem insignificant, but I think it is noteworthy that the Qur'anic text itself does not mention Canaan (it only mentions Egypt or *miṣr* by name), but Canaan is incorporated in the exegetical literature.

Ambiguity of Language: Who Is the Rabb (Lord)?

A point of explicit contrast exists between the abridgement of Ibn Kathīr and Mawdudi who takes issue with the word *rabb* (lord), interpreted as human lords or masters, in reference to Zulaykha's husband in the Joseph narrative (Q12:25) and thinks the term could only be used in reference to God. Ibn Kathīr, in its original and abridgment, does not have a problem with this dual usage of a word, for, as he clearly states, "they used to call the chief and master a 'Rabb.'"[102] The exegetical literature differs on whether Yūsuf or Zulaykha speaks the words of acknowledging one's feebleness and dependence on God (Q12:53). Ibn Kathīr opts strongly for the position that it was in fact Zulaykha: "This is the most viable and suitable understanding for the continuity of

99 Ibn Kathīr, 5:170.

100 Ibn Kathīr, 5:171.

101 Ibn Kathīr, 5:213.

102 Ibn Kathīr, 5:153.

the story and the meanings of Arabic speech," and "the first view is stronger and more obvious because it is a continuation of what the wife of the 'Azīz said in the presence of the king."[103] He cites Mawardi (d. 1058) and Ibn Taymiyya in support of this position.[104] This verse is foundational to discussions in Sufi works about the *nafs* (the self) and particularly the *nafs al-amāra bi-su'* (the self which commands to evil), and many opt for the view that it was Joseph who said these words; thus it is interesting that Ibn Kathīr so strongly advocates for Zulaykha.

This is especially significant because, as we saw in the first part of this chapter, Mawdudi does not accept the position that Zulaykha could have said these words; he strongly protests and essentially denies the possibility that the Zulaykha character can come to realize the mistake of her ways, repent, and reform herself. On the other hand, this is not a problem for Ibn Kathīr or Ibn Taymiyya, which is significant because these two, especially the latter, are often simply dismissed as "medievalists"; the expectation is that they would hold more conservative and more patriarchal views. However, in this case, it is the modern interpreter Mawdudi who holds the misogynistic position that denies the possibility of redemption and even the possibility that she could have acknowledged her wrongs and referred to God's mercy and an understanding of the nature of the self (*nafs al-'ammarra bi'su'*).

As opposed to Mawdudi, who interprets *dīn* as religion in a broad sense, the translators for Ibn Kathīr are fine with translating *dīn* in Q12:75 simply as law.[105] They also affirm Jacob's literal

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103 Ibn Kathīr, 5:178.

104 Ibn Kathīr, 5:178.

105 Ibn Kathīr, 5:192.

blindness or losing of sight, which is miraculously restored by the end of the story.[106] This literal reading of a miracle, as we saw before, does not sit well with Muhammad Asad, who in line with his appeal to rationalism seeks to interpret this occurrence figuratively.

While Mawdudi takes issue with the idea that a prophet would allow another prophet and their family to prostrate to him, Ibn Kathīr does not have an issue with this: "In the laws of these and previous Prophets, it was allowed for the people to prostrate before the men of authority, when they met them. This practice was allowed in the law of Ādam until the law of 'Īsā [Jesus], peace be upon them, but was later prohibited in our law. Islām made prostration exclusively for Allāh alone, the Exalted and Most Honored."[107]

Gender[108]

Connected to the issue of prostrating, in his commentary on this verse Ibn Kathīr mentions, and the abridgers and translators reproduce a hadith narration of, the Prophet Muhammad stating, "If I were to order anyone to prostrate before anyone else (among the creation), I would have ordered the wife to prostrate before her husband because of the enormity of right on her" (sourced from the hadith collection of Ibn Majah 1:595). It is interesting that despite the special attention given to and regard for hadith authenticity, there is no discussion about the authenticity of this narration. On the other hand, people like the progressive Muslim academic Khaled Abou El Fadel, Kecia Ali, and others have drawn explicit attention to factors they deem to be conclusive about the

106 Ibn Kathīr, 5:201, 208.

107 Ibn Kathīr, 5:211.

108 For a study on gender in the Qur'an, see Karen Bauer, *Gender Hierarchy in the Qur'an: Medieval Interpretations, Modern Responses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

weakness of this narration in terms of hadith standards; they object to the idea that the Prophet Muhammad would say such a thing, and they advocate for interpretations to placate the objections of many modern readers. The point I want to raise here is that the editors and translators did not apparently see this narration as problematic or in need of a footnote or other explanation. As can be expected, Muhammad Asad, more attune to modern sensibilities, does not mention this narration, even though it existed in the premodern tafsir traditions that he drew from—another instance of the choices that go into informing selections, which emphasizes the construction aspect of making tradition.

Another issue relating to male dominance or power is a section at the very end of the Joseph chapter entitled "All the Prophets Are Humans and Men." Ibn Kathīr comments that prophets were selected by God and were exclusively men.[109] I would like to investigate further the curious reference provided for this point (al-Ash'ari). Salafis in general, as I mentioned at the outset of this part, are disparaging of Ash'aris—although they do embrace the idea that al-Ash'ari, toward the end of his life, wrote a work wherein he refuted ideas associated with the Mu'tazila;[110] that is probably why Ibn Kathīr can mention and frame commentary around this reference. Nevertheless, scholars such as Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) are known to have held that women could in fact be prophets.[111]

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109 Ibn Kathīr, 5:221.

110 See Wasim Shiliwala, "Constructing a Textual Tradition: Salafī Commentaries on al-ʿAqīda al-ṭaḥāwiyya," *Die Welt des Islams* 58 (2018): 461–503. Shiliwala notes that due to "the historical prevalence of the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī schools of theology […] most pre-modern theological texts were written from a perspective that is fundamentally at odds with Salafism" (469).

111 M. Zakyi Ibrahim, "Ibn Ḥazm's Theory of Prophecy of Women: Literalism, Logic, and Perfection," *Intellectual Discourse* 23, no. 1 (2015): 75–100.

Conclusion

As Stowasser put it, "while many readings are possible of the Qur'anic text, the text itself is greater than the sum total of its many readings."[112] For Mawdudi, as a postcolonial activist, the Qur'an provides guidance on the importance of Islamic character in shaping an Islamic polity. For Asad, the Qur'anic narrative differs remarkably and notably from Genesis, and it is conducive to deriving abstract principles and rational analysis. Asad is often able to draw from the kalāmi commentary traditions on the Qur'an to support his rationalist readings. For him, there are no miraculous interventions in the narrative; rather, he highlights trust in God as the central quality that believers must inculcate in their daily lives while taking practical actions. In Mubarakpūrī's abridgment of Ibn Kathīr, the Qur'an is pristine, unadulterated guidance; the Islam of the Prophet Muhammad abrogates previous religious dispensations. The publisher of this work is explicit in its claim to expunge non-Qur'anic material; however, these find their way into the commentary regardless, and there is an emphasis on tracing the narrative's historical details such as places, chronology, and names and identities of individuals. Thus, the same Qur'anic chapters have been read in the twentieth century with a variety of emphases that reflect the background and concerns of each commentator.

In addition to the main three sources I have looked at, here are brief overviews of some contemporary North American readings of this Qur'anic narrative ranging from a retelling of the narrative from a counseling perspective, a retelling that emphasizes social justice activism and a mystical reading that emphasizes redemption and spiritual growth.

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112 Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an*, 56.

Ingrid Mattson on Sura Yūsuf: Storytelling as Healing

Dr. Mattson was introduced by a Muslim community leader. Mattson is a white Canadian woman who converted to Islam and earned her Ph.D. in Islamic studies at the University of Chicago in 1999. She taught and directed the Muslim chaplaincy program at Harford Seminary in Connecticut from 1998-2012. Notably, she served as vice-president and then president of one of the largest American Muslim organizations, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) from 2001-2010. Since 2012, she has been a professor of Islamic studies at Huron University College at Western University in London, Canada. She currently leads a project called The Hurma Project that seeks to address spiritual and sexual abuse in Muslim communities.[113]

In November 2016, Dr. Ingrid Mattson delivered a lecture entitled "How to Tell a Beautiful Story: The Tale of Joseph in the Qur'an." It took place at the King's Campus Ministry, which is a Catholic institution at King's University College in London, Ontario in Canada. The event was opened by a welcoming address from a pastor and was sponsored by the non-profit Christian organization, Veritas Forum.[114] It was also co-sponsored by the Center for Jewish-Catholic-Muslim Learning at the university. In contrast with other lectures or texts that I look at, which were delivered or published in a mostly Muslim majority context, this lecture is significant for its presentation for a mostly non-Muslim, Christian audience. Perhaps because of this reason, there is an extra emphasis on presenting the Joseph narrative in a relatable manner, even across faith traditions.

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[113] See https://hurmaproject.com/. Also see https://ingridmattson.org/about/

[114] This organization "puts the Christian faith in dialogue with other beliefs and invites participants from all backgrounds to seek truth together." See https://www.veritas.org/who-we-are

In the lecture which focuses on the symbolism contained in the narrative, Mattson introduces Sura Yūsuf as one of her favorite stories ever and a story which is known to followers of the Abrahamic religions. Speaking to a non-Muslim majority audience, she first makes some introductory remarks about the Qur'an and its organization into suras or "chapters". She describes Sura Yūsuf as a sura that is medium in length and highlights that Muslims generally see the Qur'an as revelation from God to the Prophet Muhammad.

Mattson complicates the idea of a literal reading of the Qur'an and points to the importance of symbolism. She asks, "What is the proper way to look at the Qur'an?" For a believing or observant Muslim, she says, the Qur'an is the word of God. She contests the assumption that because of this belief, Muslims should be seen as "scriptural literalists." She argues that the Qur'an can be read in ways where ambiguity of the meaning of words is recognized, there could be many meanings to the same word (polysemic). She says, "there are many exegetical tools or tools of interpreting the Qur'an that are applied to the text."[115] (12:30). She distinguishes between "what the Qur'an says" and "what the Qur'an means." (13:28). She also acknowledges metaphorical or symbolic readings of the Qur'an, which she especially notes as common in Shī'ism (14:22). In her essay, "How to Read the Quran," which is the first of fifteen essays that accompanies the translation and commentaries in the 2015 publication of *The Study Qur'an,* she writes how the Muslim belief in the Qur'an as the word of God "does not mean that the Quran is supposed to be read literally." She highlights that one should not "neglect its symbolic and inner meanings."[116]

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[115] "How to Tell a Beautiful Story: The Tale of Joseph in the Qur'an (Dr. Ingrid Mattson)." *YouTube,* uploaded by King's Campus Ministry, 7 Nov 2016, https://youtu.be/zL89Oz1YJAA.
[116] Ingrid Mattson, *The Study Quran*, 158.

She highlights that Sura Yūsuf ought to be read in the genre of a story, "because the Qur'an itself says this is a story." She defines *qiṣṣa* or story as "a narrative told about something that has happened in a particular format." (10:10). Elements of a good story, she says, has a plot, with twists and turns, comes to some form of resolution, leaves you with something to think about, strong characters that show their humanity, and has vivid settings. A good story also has conflict, Mattson says, and if it is told orally, it will have repetition, rhythm, and be interesting and enjoyable to listen to. (19:50). Sura Yūsuf has all these elements of storytelling and thus is extremely engaging. Mattson argues that God uses the form of storytelling to relay messages is instructive for believers to also make use of this form and these elements of a good story. She points to how many premodern or classical Muslim scholars recognized the importance of telling stories, especially in their social and cultural environments, where stories were integral to the lives of many. She also points to the pushback by what she calls "sober" Muslim scholars against some of the storytellers in their societies. Some of these scholars believed that there were untrue or problematic stories, especially about the prophets of God, who are believed to be protected by God from sinning, as upheld by the theological doctrine of *'iṣma* or infallibility of the prophets. I will return to Mattson's critical approach to some of the extra-Qur'anic narrations at the end.

Mattson points out that the Qur'an highlights not only its meaning or message, but also the form in which those messages are embodied. (26:45). Thus, rhythm and all the elements of storytelling she listed are important factors. In distinction to the other commentators that I have looked at, Mattson is unique in especially highlighting the form of the message and these elements of good storytelling and how they can be impactful in a therapeutic and chaplaincy setting. Others occasionally draw out what they see as modern relevance from the narrative of Yūsuf, but none of

them systematically highlight the elements of good storytelling as Mattson does. In the lecture, Mattson then recounts the plot of Sura Yūsuf (28-43 minutes), which I will skip over, as this will be known to my readers from the previous chapter.

Mattson then turns to themes of the sura in the objects, characters and dialogue. (43) Someone can do wrong, evil, betray, but they may be forgiven. Patience is especially highlighted through pithy statements such as when Jacob says, "Patience is beautiful." Patience is incredibly important for all those who experience adversity and difficulty. However, Mattson points out that this can be almost a throwaway statement and points out the inadequacy of simply sharing this statement to help someone going through difficulties. (45:54)

In chaplaincy teaching settings which she teaches in, it is not therapeutic or comforting to simply just tell someone going through difficulties to be patient. Later in the lecture, she highlights how having an external story where the protagonist experiences the ups and downs of their journey can be extremely relatable, comforting and even healing.

Another theme Mattson highlights from the story is that there is both an external and internal reality. Appearances can be deceptive, in other words. A lesson from the narrative is that this world often will lie to us and what is true will often be hidden. She reads the shirt (Ar. *Qamīṣ)* symbolically as a stand in for self, for the person, what covers one's exterior. A shirt is mentioned in Sura Yūsuf three times. First, when the brothers bring back Yūsuf's shirt with the blood of an animal as false evidence, the one who is able to see beyond this deceiving appearance is a prophet who has knowledge that does not come from looking at the external, but rather from looking at the inner reality of things, and thus has access to some of the unseen and has insight. The second mention of a shirt in the sura is the shirt Joseph is wearing when the woman attempts to seduce

him. The shirt being ripped is an attempt for her to corrupt Joseph's morality. In the end, the shirt being ripped from the back exonerates Joseph and is used as proof for his innocence. The third mention of the shirt is when Joseph presents his shirt to his brothers to heal his father's eyesight. Here, the truth, Mattson says, brings the exterior shirt to heal the rift between the inner and outer.

Mattson points out that while the father loses his eyesight, where he can no longer see this world, yet he holds on to what is actually truth. The world around him has betrayed the truth and is full of lies. While Jacob loses his sight, he maintains his absolute faith that his sons are still alive and that God will get him out of this (50:40). On the other hand, Joseph's brothers have perfectly fine outward eyesight, yet, even when they stand before Joseph, they don't recognize him. Yūsuf recognizes them because he knows the truth, while the brothers are living in a world of lies. They cannot see him until go to Egypt with humility and start the process of repentance. Then they become aware and can actually recognize him.

Mattson also notes the theme of something hidden throughout the narrative. The grain has to be stored for seven years, in order to provide provisions for the coming famine. (52:15). She points out that without understanding of the unseen (Ar. *Ghayb*), it is difficult to have patience or sacrifice for a greater good. In Sura Yūsuf, the grain is stored in order not to starve afterwards which is known through the interpretation of the king's dream by Yūsuf. This is a broader lesson of how some things remain unseen and hidden to us, and only come out and ripen when is good for us, Mattson teaches. Another example of something being hidden is when Joseph hides the goblet or drinking cup inside the pack of his youngest brother. She notes that he does that for his brothers to start process of awareness of what they had done.

She highlights that distance from the world is part of the maturation and preparation process for greater insight. The well and prison represent these tight, narrow, confined spaces where one cannot interact much with the world. Yūsuf undergoes a journey of growth where he develops from his initial stage of not being able to interpret his dream himself, but rather through the assistance of his father, to becoming ready for prophecy, and the responsibility to interpret dreams. Dreams, she states, have meaning, they are messages cloaked in metaphor and symbolism. The ones able to interpret them correctly are guided by God, especially the prophets. The lesson overall is that there is a deeper reality to things, which we may not understand it at the time, except by those given insight by God.

Mattson says that as someone who works sometimes a pastoral context, the Joseph story a beautiful healing story which read again and again, can help heal people. For those have been traumatized, it can be difficult to directly address the point of their trauma. However, exposed to a story with symbolism and metaphor, which has characters going through difficulties and triumph, such as that faced by Joseph being sold into slavery, being separated from his family, being falsely accused and imprisoned, to being vindicated, can give hope to one to also find a way out. She highlights that Sura Yūsuf is not just a moralistic narrative, but rather, represents storytelling with symbolism and all the elements of good storytelling, which appeals at very deep level of human conscious and imagination. She ends by noting that so many people need healing. (1:02:00).

In summary, we see how Mattson highlights the symbolism and elements of storytelling as part of the healing process. It makes sense that she would be particularly interested in this angle from her work in teaching chaplaincy. We also see that what a particular commentator or lecturer will highlight also is shaped by their own positionality and context. The themes and aspects of the

form of the narrative are intriguing and important elements, which the three main commentators I have looked at did not delve into in the same way that Mattson does.

Mattson identifies what she sees as the necessity and desirability for Muslim academics to take up "critical methodologies that have developed within Western universities." She points out regarding the extra-Qur'anic material, especially regarding the narratives of previous prophets, which are known as Isrā'īliyāt, as containing false and problematic stances. Some of these narrations state the angel Gabriel came to Joseph when he was in the well, or that Joseph saw the face of his father when the wife of the 'Aziz approached him. She writes, "Most of these stories have little probability of originating in revelation and, in many cases, clearly conflict with general Qur'anic principles, if not specific narratives."[117] We have already noted that many contemporary Muslims are uneasy with aspects of this material and seek to dissect or remove them from what they consider to be authoritative Islamic sources. Mattson writes in praise of the Muslim reformers who questioned these narratives:

Indeed, the Isra'iliyaat that most undermine Qur'anic values are those related to women. Barbara Stowasser notes that these misogynistic stories 'were accepted and propagated by the consensus (*ijma'*) of the learned doctors of law and theology until eighteenth-century premodern reformists began to question their authoritative status. Since the nineteenth century, Islamic modernists have denied the authenticity and doctrinal validity of what they viewed as medieval extraneous interpretative 'lore,' while re-emphasizing the Qur'anic notion of the female's full personhood and moral responsibility.[118]

[117] Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur'an,* 194
[118] Mattson, 194n17.

However, she notes the difficulty of "establish[ing] a coherent methodology for weeding out those stories that conflict with Qur'anic principles and values."[119] Mattson argues for the necessity of extensive scholarship and critical approaches and recognizes the inadequacy of some of the influential Muslim activists of modern Islam in lacking the scholarly tools to be able to develop such a critical approach. In particular, she names Qutb and Mawdudi:

> With the success of the argument that the doors of *ijtihad* should open and that consensus should be expanded to include the voices of non-specialists, writers like Qutb and Mawdudi did not feel restrained by their lack of scholarly credentials to make claims about the the meaning of the Qur'an.[120]

Mattson also is explicit in drawing attention to what she sees as limitations of the approaches of traditionalist ulema in venerating the received tradition, without employing a critical approach to problematic aspects of that tradition. She writes, "While activists and revivalists are limited by their superficial understanding of classical Islamic learning, staunch traditionalists must be aware of the severe limitations of the inherited tradition."[121] She thus represents a contemporary believing Muslim academic who grapples with the premodern inherited intellectual traditions of Islam, advocating the need for erudition and scholarship as well as critical methods in approaching those traditions.

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[119] Mattson, 195
[120] Mattson, 230.

[121] Mattson, 231.

Omar Suleiman on Social Justice

Omar Suleiman is an American Muslim imam, scholar and activist, who has lectured on Sura Yūsuf. He is the founder of Yaqeen Institute which serves as a Muslim research institute especially concerned about young Muslims.[122] Suleiman has also been active in speaking against police brutality, racism, the excess of US militarism, and authoritarian regimes in Muslim majority contexts. In facing injustice and tyranny, Suleiman believes that "Muslim theology can be a source of liberation."[123] Social justice is very important to Suleiman, and given this activist inclination, it is not surprising that Suleiman's commentary on Sura Yūsuf overlaps with some of Mawdudi's activist concerns. Suleiman highlights how Muslims can take solace from the narrative and be more intensely engaged in social justice initiatives in their localities. He ties in references to current events that concern Muslims around the world and especially from the US context where he is based, even as he speaks in Singapore. The recording of his talk on "Guidance from Surah Yūsuf" is from 2015. This recording was posted online to the YouTube page for the Bayyinah organization[124] on April 12, 2016, and as of January 2022 has almost 1.4 million views.[125]

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[122] https://yaqeeninstitute.org/about-us/our-mission

[123] Christopher Petrella, "A radical form of white supremacy deserves nothing less than a radical response," *The Guardian,* July 25, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/25/a-radical-form-of-white-supremacy-deserves-nothing-less-than-a-radical-response

[124] Bayyinah was founded and led by another American Muslim of Pakistani descent, Nouman Ali Khan. In 2017, Khan and Suleiman had a falling out and they no longer do programs together. Bayyinah and Khan actually launched a lawsuit against Suleiman for supposedly taking their brand or the specific methodology of teaching and marketing. The lawsuit was dismissed n November 30, 2017. https://5pillarsuk.com/2017/10/18/nouman-ali-khans-bayyinah-institute-launches-lawsuit-against-imam-omar-suleiman/

[125] Omar Suleiman, *Guidance from Sura Yūsuf – Omar Suleiman – Singapore 2015,* YouTube, April 12, 2016, https://youtu.be/nsuT0sBsRWg

How the Yūsuf narration can be a source of inspiration for contemporary Muslims is a central theme that runs throughout his talk. Suleiman emphasizes the motif of hope and the "light at the end of the tunnel" even in the difficult circumstances that Yūsuf faces from imprisonment, losing family and being accused of a crime which he did not commit. Pointing out that the narrative of Yūsuf was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in a time of intense hardship in the late Meccan period, Suleiman advises his audience to read this sura to find comfort in times of sadness. Suleiman states, "Allah reveals Sura Yūsuf to comfort him, [the Prophet Muhammad]. When we find ourselves in huzn or grief," we should recite it. He makes a parallel between the Prophet who faced difficulties from his own relatives and tribe members with those today who experience conflicts with their family or community members

Suleiman states that it is natural "to desire to look at the opposite sex." However, he teaches that making one's own pleasure subservient to Allah's pleasure produces an ethical and moral subject. Suleiman takes Yūsuf's plea to God that being imprisoned would be "more beloved" to him than engaging in what was unlawful, specifically adultery (Q12:33), to make a broader point to stand up for one's principles. Rather than focus on sexual impropriety exclusively, Suleiman broadens the scope to make this a lesson for being grounded and firm upon one's principles and not giving in to compromising them despite the worldly comforts that one could accrue. In this context, he draws attention to the example set by the early Muslim scholar Imam Aḥmad (d. 855), who he says, stood for a "principle, a foundation of our religion he believed in," even though other religious scholars tried to convince him to acquiesce to the political authorities of the time. Again, we see that standing up for justice and engaging in political activism is very important to Suleiman's approach.

Suleiman highlights the Prophet Muhammad's example also in "not compromising" on foundational beliefs, even with opposition from his own people. He points to Yūsuf's consistency, which is demonstrated through praise for his character as being from the doers of good (*min al-muḥsinīn).* This is repeated both when he was in prison and when he had his position of power. Similarly, he states that the Prophet Muhammad's fundamental character did not change when he went from being persecuted and impoverished in Mecca to his position of leadership and authority in Medina. He rhetorically asks, "Did the Prophet stop sitting with Bilal and Khabbab al-Arat," mentioning two of the companions of the Prophet that were from lower classes or outside of the Meccan aristocracy. The Prophet's actions and character are highlighted as exemplary for holding on to one's principles, even as one's circumstances shifts significantly, as the Prophet goes from a persecuted preacher with few followers in Mecca to overseeing a city-state with thousands of followers in Medina. Suleiman highlights consistency, regardless of ease and comfort or difficulty, as a prized ethic for Muslims.

While Suleiman is speaking in different circumstances than that of the postcolonial commentator Mawdudi, nevertheless, like Mawdudi, Suleiman uses the imprisonment of Joseph to draw attention to societal injustice as a matter of concern for believing Muslims to connect their reading of scripture with what he sees as pressing issues of their times. Historically, there is a great timespan that separate the events in the narrations, whether the events in Joseph's life, the Prophet Muhammad's experience of being 'boycotted', to Donald Trump and the worry about singling out Muslims to carry special identification. But time is collapsed in this retelling of the narrative of Joseph to tie together contemporary realities.

Suleiman highlights political prisoners today who are unjustly imprisoned by "tyrants" for trying to maintain their dignity and "standing for justice." He cites a contemporary Muslim scholar for noted that it is fitting for tyrants who falsely slander the name of their critics and thus "robbed others of peace of mind in this world" to be held accountable in the hereafter. In his writing, Suleiman has noted that people often use religion to gain power and oppress others. He argues, "The problem isn't religion; the problem is the perception of power that has so frequently poisoned men who wear the garb of any religion. Every oppressor is intoxicated by the illusion of power."[126]

Connecting with the broader movement in contemporary Islam to reexamine certain hadith narrations for their authenticity, Suleiman engages in critique of some of the narrations in the exegetical traditions. These narrations fault Yūsuf supposedly for depending upon a person (the freed prisoner) as opposed to depending on God alone. Suleiman displays a critical attitude here calling these narrations "erroneous." For Suleiman, taking the material means available to one is not religiously problematic; it does not in conflict with trusting in God. By making this point explicit and using his authority to disagree with a previous trend within the exegetical commentary, Suleiman makes the narrative of Yūsuf easier for modern audiences to relate to. Instead of demanding and expecting a very high standard of absolute reliance upon God, and an idea that taking material means is less than ideal, he argues that Muslims are enjoined to take material means. This also lends to the activist impulse to take initiative and engage in human relationships and organizing and mobilization, rather than an understanding that any of this would conflict with a proper understanding of reliance upon God. What stands out is the emphasis on taking material

[126] Omar Suleiman, *Guidance from Sura Yūsuf – Omar Suleiman – Singapore 2015,* YouTube, April 12, 2016, https://youtu.be/nsuT0sBsRWg

means and standing up for one's principles even in the face of opposition from one's community. While he does not expound too much on this, putting his commentary together with the broader initiatives he has been part of, Suleiman is keen to highlight religious messages that challenge what he sees as being part of an unjust order.

Suleiman's concluding message is to see God as the source of all that happens in the world, and through cultivation of a relationship with God, one should be consistent in their character and ethics, regardless of whether one enjoys worldly success or experiences deprivation and difficult circumstances. Speaking to a majority Muslim audience in Singapore, he urges them to be grateful for the blessing of being born into Islam, rather than having to search for it.

Fode Drame: A Sufi Interpretation of Sura Yūsuf

In this section, I would like to turn to a presentation on Sura Yūsuf that was given by Imam Fode Drame (b. 1970s), who currently also travels widely and holds retreats in Canada and the U.S., including at the Muslim Life Program at Princeton University and at the Islamic Center of New York University. Born in Gambia, to a noted Islamic scholar and Sufi, Al-Hadj Ousman Drame and Oummou Sylla, Drame memorized the Qur'an as a young boy and studied in Dakar. He moved to Montreal in his twenties in the 1990s and currently lives in Vancouver, Canada. Many of his talks are available through the website of the Zawiya Foundation, which he founded in 2005.[127] The stated vision of the organization is to "spread love and happiness and build a three-dimensional relationship between man and his Creator, between man and himself, and

[127] http://zawiyah.ca/

between him and the entire creation."[128] He has several written works as well. He has works in Arabic and is well versed in a quite a number of languages, including French, English, Hebrew, Latin, Greek, German and Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics.[129] The talk I examine here runs for about one hour and is entitled, "The Journey To Fulfill God's Word: Surah Yūsuf."[130] Of the commentaries I have examined most closely in this dissertation, Asad and Mattson emphasized certain metaphorical and symbolic readings. Fode goes even further, explicitly connecting the narrative to Sufi teachings, including progression upon the spiritual path, knowledge of God, and the importance of dreams, that go beyond Asad's focus on the intellect and rationality. The general understanding offered is that intuition and spiritual states can offer insights that go beyond those available through reliance upon one's rationality only.

As Kristin Sands notes, Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an, " are distinct from other types of Qur'ānic commentaries both in terms of content, which reflects Sufi ideas and concepts, and the variety of styles ranging from philosophical musings to popular preaching to literary narrative and poetry."[131] Symbols and metaphorical language are prominent appealed to in this type of interpretation.[132] Noting the multiplicity of Sufi interpretations, Sands highlights that "Sufi interpretations are more suggestive than declarative; they are "allusions" (*ishārāt*) rather than

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[128] http://zawiyah.ca/zawiyah-foundation.html

[129] https://www.masinapublications.com/behind-the-ink

[130] "The Journey To Fulfill God's Word: Surah Yūsuf," https://livestream.com/zawiyahfoundation/nocturnals/videos/157853583,

[131] Kristin Sands, *Ṣūfī commentaries on the Qur'ān in classical Islam* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1.

[132] Sands, *Ṣūfī commentaries*, 2.

explanations (*tafāsīr*)."[133] Sufi interpretations have been attacked, notably by the medievalists Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Jawzī,[134] who have enjoyed greater popularity in the contemporary period with the growth of the Salafi movement. Most importantly, Sufis argue that "the Qur'ān has many levels of meaning, and therefore it would be wrong to limit its meaning to only those meanings transmitted in the interpretative tradition."[135]

In comparison with the other commentaries I have examined, what is distinctive in Drame's approach is that the Qur'anic stories are read as model or paradigms for individual growth and the motif of Sufi journeying or traveling to God through various stages. Drame particularly draws attention to Sura Yūsuf, as being "easy to use as a model" precisely because it focuses on the story of Joseph as opposed to multiple stories which are evoked in other chapters. He also teaches seeing the story as comprising of multiple phases, and culminating in success, where Yūsuf proves himself through undergoing three stages of trials: separation from family, temptation of the flesh and imprisonment. Yūsuf's success is realized in achieving *ma'rifa*, a Sufi term which connotes deep knowledge and awareness of God. Once the vision Yūsuf had is fulfilled, he is ready to journey back to God, having fulfilled his task in this worldly life.

For Drame, the most important thing to draw from the narrative are the implications and lessons that can be drawn out for the individual seeker of God on their spiritual journeys to

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[133] Sands, *Ṣūfī commentaries*, 3.

[134] Sands, *Ṣūfī commentaries*, 50-56.

[135] Sands, *Ṣūfī commentaries*, 63. This can be seen in contrast with the modern Salafī approach which only values the transmitted interpretations especially as recorded by Ṭabarī and then abridged by Ibn Kathīr. Modern Salafīs further abridged Ibn Kathīr, excluding narrations from the Biblical traditions, weak ḥadīth, or positions in jurisprudence or theology that they deem to be problematic.)

recognize God as the true source, and deity who should be relied upon. Thus one should heed God's messages and reform one's ways and be attached to God. In this telling the Yūsuf narrative becomes one about spiritual struggle and the stages or phases that an individual seeker undergoes in order to ultimately achieve a state of *ma'rifa*. "The last stage of one's spiritual growth is to be an '*ārif* [knower of God]. It is to recognize the truth wherever you see it in any form," Drame says, asserting that "truth comes in many forms." Once the "word of God," embodied in the dream in the Yūsuf narrative, is fulfilled, one "is ready to go" as one has fulfilled "why you are here." Blindness of one's heart or inner sight is the worst thing that can happen, even worse than blindness of the physical eyes, Drame says. In Drame's telling, one's family, like the family of Joseph, can be an obstacle and distraction from dedicating oneself to God, and one must make a *hijra* or migration from them and other some impediments to one's "path to fulfillment." Trials and struggles immediately befall the one given knowledge by God, for God to test an individual and are part of the "fulfillment of the word." One is tested, like Yūsuf, to see whether one will "choose fleeting, trivial pleasures of the flesh over the pleasure of knowledge and wisdom." Physical pleasures are contrasted with intellectual and spiritual ones.

Drame highlights that the main theme of the Joseph narrative story is that "no one can change God's word," quoting another Qur'anic verse from Sura Yūnus (10). He connects the two chapters by saying that "Ya'qub believed that *la tabdila li kalimat Allah,* there is no change for word of God." People "can cause you trouble, harm, inconvenience you," but ultimately God's word or will will be carried out and come to fruition. The notion that God is firmly in control of all that which happens is a central lesson of the narrative.

Drame teaches that if something is communicated directly to you by God, that thing will surely come to pass, no matter how long it takes. The journey is about one's struggle to reach the point where that word becomes manifested in this world. Even though someone may have a vision or dream, they may not know how God's plan will unfold and that word will be realized or actualized. Regarding the wife of the 'Azīz, Drame says that that Yūsuf "knew Allah had plan for her to be his wife," and because of that became "confused" in the moment and refers to this confusion as the meaning of the verse "She inclined towards him, and he inclined towards her." However, Drame asserts, "Allah may give you something, but you have to wait for it come in its right time." I should note that the idea that Yūsuf marries the wife of the 'Azīz (she is named as Zuleykha) after the death of the 'Azīz is prominent in the Persian, Bengali, and Pashto literature and poetry that develops in the medieval period to early modern periods especially through the works of the Muslim scholar and poet, Jamī, who like Rumi, was well-regarded and studied in the seminaries until the modern period.[136] Yūsuf Ali in his translation and commentary of the Qur'an makes note, or reference to it. But otherwise, this idea is sidelined in many of the contemporary Qur'anic commentaries.

[136] See for example, Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yūsuf: Whose "Best Story'? *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Nov. 1997), 485—508. See also the following three chapters, Thibaut d'Hubert, "Foundational Maḥabbat-nāmas: Jāmī's Yūsuf u Zulaykhā in Bengal (ca. 16th–19th AD), pp. 649-691; Ayesha A. Irani, "Love's New PavilionsŚāhā Mohāmmad Chagīr's Retelling of Yūsuf va Zulaykhā in Early Modern Bengal," pp. 692-751 and C. Ryan Perkins, "A Bounty of GemsYūsuf u Zulaykhā in Pashto," pp. 777–797 in *Jāmī in Regional Contexts: The Reception of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's Works in the Islamicate World, ca. 9th/15th-14th/20th Century* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019).

However, the existence of Fode's presentation as contemporary Muslim indicates that this reading and interpretation is not completely lost, although it is not as widely disseminated. Fode's interpretation would certainly face contestation and opposition from other Muslims who question the authenticity of these narratives of falling in love and being reunited in marriage.

In contrast to Suleiman, who faults the reading of the narrative that blames taking means, Drame sees that eagerness to take means by oneself is also a fault. Drame sees Yūsuf as being mistaken in his eagerness to get out of prison, when he takes the additional step of asking the freed prisoner to remember him when he gets out. Drame sees this as Yūsuf "interfering" with the divine process, "spoiling the whole thing." The most important thing is for the individual to recognize that God is the Actor, behind everything which happens, and as Drame puts it: "as long as He remembers you, the whole world can forget you, you're not forgotten. But if God forgets you, you're really forgotten." Drame here draws a subtle implication from this verse, tying it together with another verse of the Qur'an, about not forgetting God, but rather being in a state of remembrance of God (*dhikr*).

Drame has emphasized that one should not exert oneself in defending oneself, but rather resign and leave affairs to God. He says that when Yūsuf defended himself against the charge made by the wife of the 'Azīz against him, "God wasn't pleased with that, God doesn't like for you to champion your own *nafs* [self], that's God's job." Here, a defense of oneself against false charges is seen as being blameworthy, as if it is engaging in some kind of valorization of the self, which is seen as a fault and something to avoid at all costs. However, later in the narrative where Yūsuf does assert his own qualifications as knowledgeable and a "good keeper" Drame does recognize that in such a situation of need, it is allowed to speak about yourself, "because if you

don't, you would be hiding knowledge." He cites a hadith about punishment for the one who hid knowledge that people needed.

Drame also highlights how Ya'qūb (Jacob) gives advice to his sons when they go to enter Egypt to enter through different doors, as opposed to drawing attention to themselves as one large group. However, Drame notes, this is coupled with Ya'qub's statement that he cannot avail them against God's plan. Despite "what I'm telling you, I can't prevent what God wills," but still it is his responsibility to warn and give advice based on the knowledge that he has, and this is what human beings must do, as they are perpetually less in knowledge than the all-knowing Deity. Drame comments "Do what you know, you cannot not change God's words, but it is your duty to warn them."

Dreams are very important to Drame, who notes that the "whole story is based on a vision at the beginning of the story." Quoting the hadith that "the dreams of the prophets are true," Drame evoking the title of the talk, sees dreams as a presentation of speech or the words of God to an individual. The rest of the story and rest of one's life personally is about the struggles involved to ultimately fulfill those words. Drame notes how Yūsuf relates his dream to his father Ya'qūb, and draws the lesson to when someone has a dream, "you have to speak to someone with knowledge," you can understand the significance of that dream and interpret it for you. This is highlighted especially in the Qur'anic narrative where the king's counselors right off the king's dream as "jumble," while Yūsuf, as a recipient and bearer of this true knowledge from God, can interpret the dream. Drame highlights how Yūsuf does so "without putting any conditions for his service, it is free as it is supposed to be, because Allah sent him to teach people." This carries a subtle

implication about current teachers seeing their responsibility to teach people as opposed to reaping up material benefits for themselves.

The role of the interpreter who should be a person of true knowledge, able to look beyond the appearances or symbols to ascertain their true meaning, is incredibly important. In Drame's telling, someone may have a dream and merely be the vehicle for the message embedded in the dream to someone else ("person who sees it is not one who 'owns' the dream"). This is what happens in the Yusūf story Drame says, when others, whether the two prison inmates or the king have dreams, they are all carrying messages for Yusūf. Those dreams were for him. Dreams for Drame are symbolic, such as the symbols of dryness and wetness, (in the two prisoner's dreams) which he says represent death and life, and lean cows and fat cows (in the king's dream), represent hunger, drought and hardship and abundance and ease, and green corns as symbolizing fertility, life and dry corn as the opposite of that. Drame says that water represents life, while "bread is something that has been processes through fire, has to die," in order to become bread.[137]

I should point out that Shaykh Drama does not provide references for the material he draws upon. This can be in line with the Sufi commentaries on the Qur'an which are open to the idea of inspiration and is embracive of different meanings which may occur to the listener without overt concern about documentation from works of exegesis. Perhaps Drame's lack of providing references and sources also is simply related to the context of delivering these talks for personal enrichment for his listeners, as a Sufi shaykh concerning about the spiritual journey, as opposed to a more scholastic focus.

[137] "The Intrepretation [sic] of Dreams-Imam Fode Drame," Lampost Education Initiative, uploaded Oct 10, 2019, available at https://youtu.be/QgdvjsCWvZc. This is the last point in this thirteen minute clip.

Perhaps in written form they would be more documentation or citations. He does quote hadith but does not note the collection in which the hadith might be found.

Conclusion

I offer a close reading of implications Muslim commentators draw from the setting of the Qur'anic Joseph narrative in Egypt where Joseph's religious beliefs were not widely shared. I examine how for these contemporary Muslim commentators, writing and teaching in the context of a decade after 9/11 in the United States, the relationship Joseph has with his larger society is taught with differing points of emphasis, especially of an activist bent and a spiritual one. I use these examples to illustrate that the Qur'anic narratives are particularly rich sources to examine for the multiplicity of ways they can be read and extended and how a variety of implications are drawn for readers in different contexts. Although the core Qur'anic text remains the same, its translation, commentary, points of emphasis, or what people take to have some relevancy to their lives, is continually shaped by their environment and situations.

Chapter 4: Sura Kahf (Q18)

Overview of Sura Kahf (Q18)

After the previous chapter, which examined Sura Yūsuf, I will now turn to Sura Kahf (Q18) as interpreted by the three respective commentaries. I then follow these three with a brief presentation of some contemporary Western Muslim interpreters of the sura, noting their particular points of emphasis in a post-colonial context, from a Shi'I perspective and from a post-Salafi perspective. I focus on four main stories or narratives, even though this sura briefly mentions others: for example, the chapter opens with praise of God and this revelation and a critique of ascribing children to God (1–6); the Prophet Muhammad's grief at the disbelief of his contemporaries is acknowledged (7); earthly adornments are given as a test (8); and the earth will be made into a barren plain (9).

The Four Main Stories

1. Companions of the Cave

First, we have the narrative of the Companions of the Cave (*ashāb al-kahf*), which the chapter or sura is named after (9–26). They are young men who place their trust in God and seek refuge in a cave from being persecuted for their faith (10–16). They go with their dog, and God puts them to sleep for a very long time (17–18). As they are brought back to life, they wonder if they had only been asleep for a day or part of a day. They send one of the companions with a coin

to bring back some food (19).[1] They still fear persecution, not realizing the progression of time that has occurred while they were asleep in the cave (20). The Qur'an states that people found this cave and an inscription (*raqim*) and took the place as a site of worship or prostration (*masjid*) (21). The Qur'an instructs the Prophet not to promise anything in the future without referring to God's will (*illa an yashā Allāhu*) (23–24) and also exhorts the Prophet to be patient with those who remember God all day, not turning his eyes away from them and preferring the elites instead of them (28).

2. Two Companions, One with Two Gardens

The second main story in the chapter is a parable of two men, one who is a believer and the other who owns gardens. In the Qur'anic formulation, the second is an ingrate, or someone who engages in *kufr* (denial) of recognition of God's favors upon him (32). The passage of their conversation highlights whether one places trust in material goods or one's trust is placed in God (34–41). The Qur'an offers a parable of worldly life compared to water and vegetation, describing how everyone will be assembled for accounting (*ḥisāb*) and presented with a record of their deeds, which will be so detailed (45–49). Then there is a brief mention of how the angels (*mala'ikah*) were ordered to bow to Adam, and Iblis, one of the jinn, refused to do so (50–51). The Qur'an asks how people can take such individuals or creatures as protectors or friends (*'awliya'*) instead of God, when they are enemies (52).

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1 The commentary tradition fills in that when he goes to the marketplace, the people there are astounded by this ancient silver coin; they inquire about him, go to the cave, verify this miracle of God, and affirm bodily resurrection (*ba'th*).

3. Mūsā and Khidr

After more comments about the argumentativeness of human beings and their rejection of prophets and God's signs (54–59), the Kahf chapter moves into a narrative of Moses (Mūsā), his servant (who is not named in the Qur'anic text), and a mysterious "servant from Our servants" (*'abdun min 'ibādinā*) whom God taught directly (60–65). Moses asks to accompany him to learn from him (66). The individual replies that Moses will not be able to be patient (67–68). Moses promises to be patient, and the individual makes him promise not to ask any questions (69–70). However, sure enough, Moses is unable to keep his promise, as he witnesses his companion doing incredible, ostensibly forbidden, harmful, destructive things (71–77). In the end, before parting ways with Moses, the individual explains the unseen wisdom in each of the three acts that he performed (making a hole in the boat, killing a young boy, and repairing a wall that was about to collapse) (78–82).[2]

4. Dhul-Qarnayn or Two-Horned One

The last main story is about a figure named Dhul-Qarnayn (Two-Horned One), who appears to be a great conqueror and traveler who builds a great wall (83–93). Gog and Magog (Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj) are mentioned in relation to this wall and its eventual fall (94–101).

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2 The narrative around Mūsā and Khiḍr, similar to that of Yūsuf and Zulaykha, has given rise to a rich Islamicate literature that could be described as "scriptural, hagiographical and folkloric," as Bruce Lawrence describes in his blurb for a study on Sufi commentaries of this narrative. See Hugh Talat Halman, Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qur'ānic Story of al-Khiḍr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013). The following lines attributed to Shams-ī Tabrīzī are quoted on the back cover of this work: "Blessed is the one who finds such a servant and who holds the story of Moses and al-Khiḍr in his heart and makes it his Imam."

Sura Kahf ends with some verses emphasizing (1) the futility of those who take associates onto the One God and think that they are doing good and (2) the humanness of Muhammad, who nevertheless receives revelation (*waḥy*) (102–110).

Mawdudi on Sura Kahf

Muslim exegetes often narrate the occasion that a verse or a set of verses was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. In his introduction to Sura Kahf, Mawdudi narrates a hadith in which members of the Jewish community of Medina posed three questions to the Meccans to test whether the Prophet Muhammad's source of his recitations was God, as he claimed. Most exegetes who narrate this hadith cite the three questions as relating to the Companions of the Cave, the figure of Dhul Qarnayn, and the soul.

Among the commentators under discussion here, Mawdudi is unique in disagreeing with the view that the question concerning the soul (*rūḥ*) was the third question. This question and answer is mentioned in the seventeenth Qur'anic chapter (Q17), often titled Banī Isrā'īl or 'Isrā.' Most Qur'anic exegetes hold that this was the third question posed to the Prophet. Mawdudi asserts that the third question was not about the soul but rather about Mūsā (Moses) and the mysterious teacher Khidr. To justify this view, Mawdudi points out that Q17 is a later revelation. Since the question and answer about the soul is not in this chapter of the cave (Q18), Mawdudi does not think it was part of the three questions that are related to this narration of the *sabab al-nuzūl* (cause of revelation). In this line of reasoning, we see an assumption for the coherence of a sura or chapter of the Qur'an, even though it is widely accepted by Muslim scholars that sometimes a whole chapter was not revealed all together but rather in sets of verses revealed at various points and then placed into the chapters (suras) as we have them.

Mawdudi, as a modern subject who read widely not only in traditional Muslim texts but also in Western texts, was very conscious of the Western gaze. As can be gleaned from his introduction to his commentary, Mawdudi is very much concerned about demonstrating that the Qur'anic text is coherent with order and rationality behind its arrangement. For example, the Scottish philosopher and essayist, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), famously characterized the Qur'anic text as "a confused jumble."[3] In his introduction, Mawdudi writes the following, which demonstrates his keen observation and awareness of external (especially Western and Orientalist) critiques of the Qur'an's lack of coherence,[4] which he seeks to respond to:

> The reader may find all this so foreign to his notion of what a book should be that he may become so confused as to feel that the Qur'an is a piece of disorganized, incoherent and

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3 Carlyle wrote in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1901), 64–67:

> I must say, it [the Koran] is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite; — insupportable stupidity, in short! Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran. . . . It is the confused ferment of a great rude human soul; rude, untutored, that cannot even read; but fervent, earnest, struggling vehemently to utter itself in words . . . We said "stupid:" yet natural stupidity is by no means the character of Mahomet's Book; it is natural uncultivation rather. The man has not studied speaking; in the haste and pressure of continual fighting, has not time to mature himself into fit speech. . . . The man was an uncultured semi-barbarous Son of Nature, much of the Bedouin still clinging to him: we must take him for that. But for a wretched Simulacrum, a hungry Impostor without eyes or heart . . . we will not and cannot take him. Sincerity, in all senses, seems to me the merit of the Koran; what had rendered it precious to the wild Arab men. . . . Curiously, through these incondite masses of tradition, vituperation, complaint, ejaculation in the Koran, a vein of true direct insight, of what we might almost call poetry, is found straggling.

4 The concern to respond to Orientalist critiques of the Qur'an and traditional Muslim beliefs regarding the Qur'an can also be seen in the introduction to Mufti Taqi Usmani's book on Qur'anic sciences as well as in Mustafa Azami's work. See, Mufti Mohammad Taqi Usmani, *An Approach to the Qurānic Sciences: Uloom-ul-Quran*, trans. Mohammad Swaleh Siddiqui; rev. & ed. Rafiq Abdur Rehman (Karachi: Darul Isha'at, 2000) and Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Al-'Aẓamī, The History of the Qur'ānic Text: From Revelation to Compilation: a Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003).

unsystematic writing, comprising nothing but a disjointed conglomeration of comments of varying lengths put together arbitrarily. Hostile critics use this as a basis for their criticism.[5]

Companions of the Cave

Regarding the Companions of the Cave, the twenty-fifth verse of the chapter (Q18:25) reads, "So they stayed in their Cave three hundred years, and (some) add nine (more)." This is understood by most commentators to mean the companions were asleep in the cave for three hundred solar years or 309 lunar years. Mawdudi argues that the Qur'an is merely quoting what some people at the time believed regarding the length of their stay and not actually approving or confirming these views. He writes, "We are of the opinion that the number '300' and '309' have not been stated by Allah Himself but Allah has cited these as sayings of the people."[6]

Part of what explains his position is that Mawdudi is concerned with reconciling his understanding of the Qur'anic verse with "the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus" narrative, received through Jacob of Sergus, which Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) cites in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.[7] Mawdudi notes how Gibbon held that in this "legend," as Gibbon put it, the sleepers were only in the cave for approximately two hundred years. Mawdudi seems to give much weight to this narrative and chronology, so much so that he offers a reading of the Qur'anic verse as merely referring to peoples' opinions without affirming them as accurate. The fact that Mawdudi

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5 Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdudi, *Towards Understanding the* Qur'ān, trans. and ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1988), "Kahf," xxi.

6 Mawdudi, Kahf, 21.

7 See chapter 33 of Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Betty Radice (London: Folio Society, 1983–1990).

and two noted translators of the Qur'an into English before him, Pickthall and Yūsuf Ali, cite Gibbon is quite fascinating. Pickthall (1875–1936) refers to Gibbon in his translation's introduction to the cave chapter, writing, "It would seem rash to identify the story with that of the Christian Seven Sleepers; it must belong, as the story of the 'Two-Horned One' actually does belong, to rabbinical lore." [8]

Sayed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi (1914–1999), another recent South Asian Muslim scholar who wrote on this chapter of the Qur'an, also cites Western sources such as Gibbon, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, and *A Manual of Bible History*.[9] Nadwi writes of how classical Muslim scholars and historians such as Ṭabarī incorporated "myths" regarding this story; thus, he prefers "original Christian sources" over them.[10] Nadwi cites Mawdudi as well as the Syrian Jamāluddīn al-Qāsimī (1866–1914) as "having tried to explain away this apparent contradiction by putting forth the view that the words 'three hundred and add nine', mentioned in the Qur'an, simply repeat the then current traditional view instead of indicating a definite period

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8 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, The Glorious Qur'an: Text and Explanatory Translation ([Libya]: The Islamic Call Society & The Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, n.d.), 290. Pickthall, an Englishman, started his career as a novelist, journalist, and translator, visited India, and publicly converted to Islam from Christianity in 1917. He also served as imam at Working Mosque in the United Kingdom, where he led prayers and delivered Friday sermons. He believed that "the Qur'an was not just a book for Muslims but a universal message for all humankind." He relocated to Hyderabad, India, where the Nizam, "one of the world's wealthiest men," sponsored him for two years to complete his translation of the Qur'an, which appeared in 1930. "Pickthall consulted both European academics and traditional Islamic scholars during this period" (Bruce Lawrence, The Koran in English*: A Biography* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017], 57–61).

9 Sayed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Faith versus Materialism: The Message of Sūrah al-Kahf*, trans. Mohiuddin Ahmad (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2018 [2005]), 20–21. For a study of Nadwi's life and works, see Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadwi: His Life & Work* (West Yorkshire: Nadwi Foundation, 2013).

10 S.A.H.A. Nadwi, *Faith,* 24.

of the deep slumber of the youth."[11] Nadwi disagrees with this position and cites more sources than Mawdudi, both Western sources and Muslim exegetes such as Rāzī, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr, and Alūsī.[12]

The Number of Sleepers

The Qur'an mentions various views regarding the number of companions or "sleepers" in the cave, one view being that there were seven youth and their dog. The Qur'an's narrative suggests that arguing about how many individuals there were or (as some commentators do) how many days they stayed in the cave is frivolous. One should not engage in debate and argumentation concerning such matters; one should rather say God knows best (Q18:22).

Mawdudi highlights this point and expresses his discontent with previous Qur'anic exegesis, which despite these Qur'anic teachings became obsessed with arguing about the minutiae of the narratives instead of focusing on what he sees as the eternal, universal truths or morals that can be derived from the story. According to him, the latter are the main reason these narratives were revealed by God to the Prophet for the benefit of humanity, from the Prophet's time till the end of times. For Mawdudi, these sorts of teachings from the Qur'anic revelation are relevant to the solace that believers in his own time can take to strengthen themselves in the face of persecution for their beliefs. Such abstract lessons are especially worth highlighting when reading the narratives. He writes, "People must understand that no compromise will be made in regard to the Truth just as the Sleepers of the Cave did not make any compromise with regard to their creed.

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11 Sayed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Faith versus Materialism: The Message of Sūrah al-Kahf*, trans. Mohiuddin Ahmad (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2018 [2005]),, 26.

12 Nadwi, 27–28.

They did not make any compromise in regard to the Doctrine of Tauhid [pure/absolute monotheism] after they had believed in it."[13] Mawdudi faults those who become obsessed with the minutia of the narrative as missing the point of why Allah revealed the Qur'anic passage and engaging in a "useless and irrelevant discussion."[14] Again, we see his focus on viewing the Qur'an as a catalyst for social and political change, especially in the postcolonial context he was writing and working in.

Shrines

Another remarkable verse (Q18:21) that leads to debate in the Qur'anic commentary tradition regards tombs and mausoleums over the bodies of righteous people or saints. Mawdudi cites four hadiths that condemn worship at graves, and he laments the practices of many Muslims of his day as shirk or associating with God, or violating pure monotheism [Tawhid]:[15] "Thus, it is clear from the above Sayings of the Holy Prophet that building of the places of worship over the tombs is utterly unlawful; the Qur'an has merely stated as a historical fact the sinful act of the Christian priests and the Roman rulers and has not sanctioned such a thing. Therefore no God-fearing person can turn this into an argument for building mosques over the tombs."[16] Mawdudi calls it *shirk* "to discard the commandments and the guidance of Allah and to follow the orders

13 Mawdudi, Kahf, 26.

14 Mawdudi, 21.

15 Mawdudi, Kahf, 19.
16 Mawdudi, 20.

and guidance of any other than Allah, though one may not be professing with one's tongue that there is any partner of Allah."[17]

He elaborates:

> It is an irony that some people among the Muslims have misconstrued this verse of the Qur'an so as to make it lawful for themselves to build mausoleums, monuments and mosques over the tombs of the righteous persons and saints. The Qur'an has, in fact, pointed out the deviation of the workers of iniquity who prevailed over others and built a worship over the Cave of the Sleepers, who were indeed a Sign of Resurrection and of the life-after-death. But they abused this good opportunity and produced another means of practicing shirk.[18]

Two Companions, One with Two Gardens

The second main story in this chapter of the Qur'an is a parable of two men, one who is a believer and the other who owns two gardens. In the Qur'anic formulation, the person who owned two gardens was someone who engaged in *kufr* (denial) of recognition of God's favors upon him. The passage recounts a conversation between the two men highlighting the difference between placing one's trust in material goods and placing one's trust in God.

Mawdudi draws lessons from this narrative and the characterization of "unbelief" applied to the materialist owner of the garden.

17 Mawdudi, 31–34.

18 Mawdudi, 20.

> This shows that "unbelief" in Allah is not confined to the denial of the existence of God in so many words, but arrogance, pride, vanity and the denial of the Hereafter are also kufr. . . . Yet in spite of his profession, his neighbor charged him with unbelief in Allah. This is because the person, who considers his wealth and his grandeur, etc. to be the fruits of his own power and capability and not the favours of Allah, and who thinks that they are everlasting and none can take them away from him and that he is not accountable to anyone, is guilty of "unbelief in Allah."

Mawdudi draws attention to how the notion of proper belief in God entails more than may be readily assumed. Someone who believes in God may also be considered to engage in shirk and kufr, according to this understanding, for attributing powers and influence to pious individuals or to material wealth and property. This is another attempt to make the Qur'anic narrative relevant to contemporary audiences. In Mawdudi's presentations, it is wrong to attribute power and wealth to oneself as opposed to acknowledging God's bestowal of favors upon individuals, which is what the Qur'anic narrative emphasizes and tries to orient its listeners to recognize.

After this passage about the two gardens, the Qur'an exhorts the Prophet to be patient with those who remember God all day, to not turn his eyes away from them, and to not prefer the elites instead of the poor believers. In other words, the Prophet's concerns and efforts should be with the downtrodden. This is especially interesting because although Vali Nasr criticizes Mawdudi for not concerning himself with the socially disenfranchised in his political programs and visions, Mawdudi's commentary on this verse indicates otherwise.

Mūsā and Khidr

The third main narrative in this Sura deals with Mūsā (Moses) and a mysterious companion or teacher. In the Islamic exegetical tradition, Mūsā's companion is said to be named Khidr (variously pronounced), but there has been much speculation about his identity and possible continuous life. Mawdudi, with some classical precedents argues that this mysterious teacher must have been an angel, which would allow for the type of actions this individual carries out, which are clearly against the Law. But Khidr directly refers to carrying out God's will, which Mawdudi takes to argue that, although much ink has been spilled about the figure's identity, he could not have been a human being but rather an angelic force who took human shape. This phenomenon is narrated in other hadiths about the angel Gabriel (Jibrīl), who took human form when visiting the Prophet and Companions (see hadith of Jibril/Gabriel, for example).[19]

Mawdudi also demonstrates a preoccupation with trying to identify in which period a Qur'anic narrative took place historically or chronologically, in which period of the Prophet Muhammad's life he received this revelation, and in which period the story mentioned took place. Recalling the earlier discussion in the chapter on Sura Yūsuf on his stance toward incorporation of biblical material, Mawdudi criticizes "some Muslims who have been so influenced by the Talmud that they opine that in this story Moses does not refer to Prophet Moses but to some other person bearing the same name. They forget that every tradition of the Talmud is not necessarily

19The second hadith in the popular collection of the forty hadith of Nawawi, is centered on this narration as axiomatic in explaining the degrees of Iman, Islam, Ihsan, and the end of times, which are derived from the four questions that Gabriel asks the Prophet. See also Aaron Spevack's study of the nineteenth-century Azhari shaykh al-Islam, Ibrahim al-Bajuri (1783–1860), The Archetypal Sunni Scholar: Law, Theology, and Mysticism in the Synthesis of al-Bājūrī (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), especially "The Archetype and Method" and "The Gabrielian Paradigm: Al-Bājūrī's View of the Three Dimensions of Islam," 33–38.

correct."[20] He references a work of selections from the Talmud to note that there are similar narratives in the Jewish tradition that attribute these events not to Moses but to a Rabbi Jochanan or Elijah.[21] Mawdudi adamantly dismisses this attribution and exhibits a critical attitude toward Muslims' incorporating Talmudic material.[22] He argues that this encounter with Khidr happened in the early part of Moses's prophethood and even provides a map of Moses's journey, including one of the region of Sudan along the Nile River, where he believes this incident happened.

Mawdudi explicitly draws out what he sees as the lesson or moral edification that one should derive from this Qur'anic story:

> The lesson contained in this story is: You should have full faith in the wisdom of what is happening in the Divine Factory in accordance with the will of Allah. As the reality is hidden from you, you are at a loss to understand the wisdom of what is happening, and sometimes if it appears that things are going against you, you cry out, "How and why has this happened?" The fact is that if the curtain were removed from the "unseen" [ghayb], you would yourselves come to know that which is happening here is for the best. Even if sometimes it appears that something is going against you, you will see in the end it also produces some good results for you.[23]

Mawdudi tries to comfort those who witness tyranny and oppression directed toward innocent people; he wants them to see that there must be some divine wisdom behind what is happening, even if human beings have only a limited perspective on "the seeming aspects of events."[24] Mawdudi cites a number of Sufi individuals, especially through a summary of passages from the

20 Mawdudi, Kahf, 37.

21 Mawdudi, 35–36.

22 Mawdudi, 37.

23 Mawdudi, 35.

24 Mawdudi, 35–36.

Ottoman Baghdadi nineteenth-century exegete Alūsī.[25] Alūsī cites statements of distinguished Sufis, including the renowned Indian Naqshibandi Sufi shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), on the intertwining relationship between "Law" and "Spirit, or shariah and haqiqa.[26]

The narrative around Mūsā and Khiḍr, similar to that of Yūsuf and Zulaykha, has given rise to a rich Islamicate literature that could be described as "scriptural, hagiographical and folkloric," as Bruce Lawrence writes for a study of Sufi commentaries on this narrative.[27] Mawdudi, like many modern Muslims, is willing to jettison parts of the inherited Islamic tradition that he sees as failing to fulfill his standards of authenticity.

Mawdudi's Relationship with Sufism

Given that the passage in question is central to Sufi understandings of the unseen, mysterious knowledge and teachers, I want to provide some context for Mawdudi's relationship

25 Abū al-Faḍl Shihāb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Maḥmūd alk-Ālūsī al-Baghdādī, Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm wa-l-sabʿ al-mathānī, 30 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2010), 15:519–529. This is the most recent printing. However, there was a Deobandi printing from 1970–1977, which Mawdudi is likely to have had access to. That version was printed in Deoband by Muḥammad Ghānim ibn 'Abd al-Aḥad (1970 to ca. 1977). For the best concise introductory article to Alūsī, see Basheer M. Nafi, "Abu al-Thanaʾ al-Alusi. An Alim, Ottoman Mufti, and Exegete of the Qurʾan," IJMES 34 (2002): 465–494. See also Samia al-Itani, "The Travels of Abū al-Thanā' al-Ālūsī: Arabic Rihlah Literature in the 19th Century" (PhD diss., London University, 2003) and Hala Fattah, "Representations of Self and the Other in Two Iraqi Travelogues of the Ottoman Period," IJMES 30 (1998): 51–76. For Arabic studies on Alūsī, see Muḥsin Abd al-Ḥamīd, al-Alūsī mufassiran (Baghdād: Maṭba'at al-Ma'ārif, 1968); Maḥmūd al-Sa'īd al-Ṭanṭāwī, Manhaj al-Ālūsī fī Rūḥ al-ma'ānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-'aẓīm wa al-sab' al-mathānī (Cairo: Jumhūrīyat Miṣr al-'Arabīya, 1989); 'Abd Allāh Rabī' Junayd, "Minhaj al-shaykh al-Ālūsī fī tafsīri-hi Ruḥ al-mā'nī fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm wa al-sab'ī al-mathānī" (master's thesis, Islamic University of Gaza, 2011). In German, see Alev Masarwa, "Bildung—Macht—Kultur, Das Feld des Gelehrten Abū t-Tana' al-Ālūsī (1802–1854)," in Spätosmanischen Bagdad (Wuerzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2011).

26 Mawdudi, Kahf, 42.

27 See Hugh Talat Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qur'ānic Story of al-Khiḍr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013). The following lines attributed to Shams-ī Tabrīzī are quoted on the back cover: "Blessed is the one who finds such a servant and who holds the story of Moses and al-Khiḍr in his heart, and makes it his Imam."

with Sufism. Vali Nasr documents how Mawdudi's family members were descendants of "one of the most prominent branches of the Chishti Sufi order, a lineage that was later an important aspect of Mawdudi's claim to authority."[28] In 1932, Mawdudi wrote, "I belong to one such family that has a 1,300-year history of guiding, asceticism, and Sufism."[29] Mawdudi's name, in fact, comes from Khwajah Mu'inu'ddin Muhammad Chishti (1132–1246),[30] and his direct namesake is his ancestor Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1527), who migrated from Afghanistan to India.[31] One of Mawdudi's grandfathers, Mir Sayyid Hasan, was known as a Sufi pir connected to the court of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar (d. 1862).[32] Mawdudi's father, who was a lawyer, took *ba'yah* (pledge of allegiance) to a Sufi shaykh in 1900 and "pursued the mystical path. So much of Ahmad Hasan's time was spent in meditation and ascetic practice that his legal profession began to suffer."[33] Mawdudi's father relocated the family to Delhi in 1904; they settled near the shrine of Nizamu'ddin Auliya, where for three years his father was "completely immersed in his mystical pursuits while his family fell into destitution."[34]

Mawdudi believed that the "ignorant masses" failed to heed the pure messages of the prophets and, instead of worshipping God alone, worshipped the prophets and saintly figures,

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28 Nasr, Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 9.

29 Nasr, 9.

30 Nasr, 9.

31 Nasr, 9.

32 Nasr, 10.

33 Nasr, 10.

34 Nasr, 10.

adding all sorts of innovative practices such as grave worship.[35] Emphasis on these supererogatory practices diverted Muslims, according to Mawdudi, from their more fundamental duty, "their primary duty of establishing God's rule on the earth, which, in fact, had been the mission of all the Prophets."[36] Central to Mawdudi's message is the importance of developing and even transforming one's character, through what he calls *tarbiyya*, which has Sufi connotations but is modernized in a distinct way that frees the term from specific Sufi connections and from the context of a relationship with a Sufi master/teacher/shaykh/pir. According to Zaman,

> As Mawdudi saw it, Sufism's concern with the "purification of the soul" (*tazkiya-i nafs*) was not quite in line with proper Islamic teachings, and that divergence had had several results. Sufi institutions and practices had failed to produce individuals who could challenge the forces of jahiliyya or who could resist its inroads into the realm of Islam. The Sufis tended to see the purification of the soul as a means to attaining a vision of God in this world and the privileged knowledge that supposedly came with it, but there was no Qur'anic sanction for such aspirations and no reason why human beings would need that kind of knowledge. Nor did the other forms of spiritual advancement that the Sufis spoke of ever result, Mawdudi said, in the kinds of individuals that the Prophet had shaped through *his* teachings. The closest that the purification of the soul came to the purposes of Islam was in fostering piety—*taqwa*—among people. But such taqwa tended to remain limited to outward components. And where it did shape one's life more deeply, it did so only at the individual level.[37]

This interesting approach reminds us of Mawdudi's Sufi influences, including his family history and associations. This highlights the shortcomings and limitations of the labels we use when we box complex individuals into categories like "Islamist" or "activist"; digging deeper shows a more

35 Saayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam*, trans. from Urdu by al-Ash'arī (Kaula Lumpur: The Other Press and Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 6.

36 Mawdudi, 11.

37 Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 199.

complicated nexus/intersection of various streams of thought, including Sufism and attention or importance given to hadith, which is often associated with Salafis or Deobandis. Mawdudi appears to have bits of all these influences, which is true for many Muslims today who have a variety of influences instead of an exclusive derivation from one narrow school of thought.

Dhul-Qarnayn

The last main story in Sura al-Kahf is that of a figure named Dhul-Qarnayn or Two-Horned One, a great conqueror and traveler who builds a great wall. The identity of Dhu-l-Qarnayn was particularly debated in the early and middle twentieth century, and I devote a significant amount of attention here to the exchanges and various positions around this figure and the contestation among South Asian English translators and commentators. I will demonstrate how Mawdudi ought not be understood as a stand-alone figure but rather in context with South Asian commentaries on the Qur'an, which often engaged aggressively and defensively with the works of Christian missionaries.

Not satisfied with treating the narrative primarily as a parable, Mawdudi weighs in on the debate. Referring to modern archaeological findings, biblical scholarship, and *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he argues that Dhul-Qarnayn was the Persian king Cyrus and not Alexander the Great. In his introduction to the Qur'anic chapter, Mawdudi not only identifies the "historical" figure of Dhul-Qarnayn but also highlights a lesson he derives from the story—namely, that Dhul-Qarnayn places his trust not in physical, material means (building a wall) but rather in God, even as he builds the wall (as he takes the *asbab* or means).[38] Gog and Magog (Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj) are

38 Mawdudi, Kahf, 5–6.

mentioned in relation to this wall and its eventual fall; Mawdudi identifies them as "the wild tribes of North Eastern Asia."[39] He argues that those who say that Dhul-Qarnayn's wall is the Wall of China are mistaken.[40] Mawdudi interestingly does not dwell on the idea that these occurrences are taken as signs fortelling the end of times, which features strongly in other commentaries.

The four main narratives in the eighteenth chapter (The Cave) of the Qur'an are especially intriguing to examine how Mawdudi engages with the various modern forms of knowledge at his disposal. In trying to reach the newly educated young Muslim professionals of his day, Mawdudi attempts to apply contemporary knowledge from his wide reading on discoveries in archaeology, the modern discipline of "history,"[41] cartography, recent biblical scholarship, Orientalist writings, and classical and early modern commentaries on the Qur'an, such as by Alūsī (1802–1854) and Indian scholars and commentators such as Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), who were explicit in their attempt to make the Qur'an speak to the concerns of living Muslims. Mawdudi was concerned with what Orientalists and Christian missionaries said about Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and the sacred scripture of Muslims, the Qur'an. Responding to allegations about the textual incoherence of Qur'anic chapters and to charges that the Qur'an contains nothing original but is merely a jumbled assemblage of particularly Jewish and Christian ideas, he exerts himself to read these criticisms and do "source analysis" on these Qur'anic chapters.

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39 Mawdudi, 48.

40 In a viral video, Yasir Qadhi also argues that this belief that the wall refers to a wall in China is mistaken. This video highlights the continuation of modern debate surrounding interpretation of the Qur'an, including identification of figures, places, or times mentioned therein.

41 For one examination of differences between premodern notions of *tarikh* and modern history, see Najam Haider, *The Rebel and the Imām in Early Islam: Explorations in Muslim Historiography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Mawdudi was clearly under pressure to respond to the gaze of Europeans, Orientalists, and missionaries, whom he saw as adversaries of Islam. Like many South Asian Muslims before him, especially his aforementioned teacher, Hamīd ad-Din al-Farāhī (1863–1930), Mawdudi strove to argue for the Qur'an as a coherent work of literature and book of scripture.[42] An example is his position on the length of stay (approximately 200 years instead of the Qur'anic verse's 300 or 309) of the Ashab al-Kahf or the Companions of the Cave, who are known as the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in the Western tradition. Mawdudi tries to reconcile the Eastern or Islamic or Qur'anic telling of this narrative with that of Gibbon, who as an early modern historian was concerned about chronology and identifying rulers and their dates and regions. Accepting these concerns of modern historiography, Mawdudi tries to impose it on the Qur'anic narrative in his commentary.

This marks a shift from the mythos[43] approach (which does not assert that the narratives are "myths" in the sense of unfactual) to seeing narratives as moral exhortations that can be deeply personal and universal. The modern shift attempts to ground these narratives in modern historiography and identify figures, regions, and chronologies[44]—for example, discerning whether

42 For one attempt at arguing for the coherence of the Qur'an by the contemporary Pakistani scholar Amīn Ahsan Iṣlāhī, a student of Hamīd ad-Din al-Farāhī, whom Mawdudi studied with, see Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'an: A Study of Iṣlāhī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-I Qur'ān* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011). Several modern Western Muslim academics have built on the coherence argument; see, for example, Nevin Reda, *The al-Baqara Crescendo: Understanding the Qur'an's Style, Narrative Structure, and Running Themes* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017). See also Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'an* (Miami: Convivium, 2009) and *The Composition of the Qur'an: Rhetorical Analysis*, trans. Jerry Ryan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). Much has been made of a "ring structure" analysis of Qur'anic chapters; see an excellent demonstration in Jawad Anwar Qureshi, **"**Ring Composition in Sūrat Yūsuf (Q12)**,"** *Journal of the International Qur'anic Studies Association* 2 (January 1, 2017): 149–168.

43 For an accessible take on this, see Karen Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (London: Bodley Head, 2019).

the Qur'anic Fir'awn is Pharaoh, whether he was a historical figure and ruler in the time of someone named Moses, and so on: When did he rule? Which part of Egypt was his capital in? How many soldiers could he have in his army? Or, relevant for my focus, were there historical figures named Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph; was there really a ruler (king) in Joseph's time who ruled over Egypt; and was there a famine? What can historically be established? Or, was there persecution of Christian believers in the Roman/Byzantine Empire, followed by the subsequent embrace of Christianity? Was there a theological controversy surrounding resurrection in this time? Mawdudi attempts to identify Dhul-Qarnayn, Alexander the Great, Cyrus, and other figures and establish their movements and geography, including the use of cartography or maps. He does not have much to say about Gog and Magog or about the end of times, but that is another area of investigation, which I will forgo here.

The approach to these narratives as fact or mythos is a fascinating area of study for modern historians and Islamicist academics in the Western academy because many of them will view such narratives simply as legends, untrue and non-factual. Mawdudi takes these narratives to be literally true and factually based and tries to use the tools available to him to argue for their facticity in the language of modern archaeology and historiography. I do not mean that, because Mawdudi is interested in exploring modern historical methods, he completely expunges the personal and moral points that can be derived from reading the stories. My point is simply that establishing modern historical facticity is not synonymous with reading scripture, particularly the Qur'an (which is so

minimalist with the types of details that are the concern of modern historians), for its abstract and personal lessons.[45]

Mawdudi's interventions make his text particularly attractive for contemporary Muslims engaging with the modern world or with modern disciples of knowledge. As Grewal and MacIntyre point out, a tradition is in crisis when it cannot provide sufficient coherent answers on its own. Often during periods of crisis, when challenged by a rival tradition, custodians of the first tradition enter into a dialectic with the second tradition, until they can work out a healthy or more convincing, satisfying synthesis between the two, and a new stream emerges from these bodies of tradition. Put this way, we can clearly see the continuities with, and the debts Mawdudi owes to, past exegesis that he read, drew from, and built on. But on some points, Mawdudi goes further, extends the arguments, or clearly disagrees with his predecessors on positions of interpretation. All this illuminates why Mawdudi continues to be a powerfully attractive force for contemporary Muslims seeking to interpret the Qur'an in conversation with their own modern conditions and concerns.

Asad on Sura Kahf

Asad introduces the eighteenth chapter of the Qur'an as one full of allegories and symbols. This approach challenges the idea of boxing him into the incomplete and insufficient category of modernist. Asad shows his fondness for mysticism and mystical readings of the Qur'anic narratives when he writes that this chapter "is almost entirely devoted to a series of parables or allegories built around the theme of faith in God versus an undue attachment to the life of this

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45 I am thankful for conversation with Wasim Shiliwala on this point.

world."[46] He does not seek to identify figures or chronology or to place individuals into history but rather is comfortable with reading the narratives as parables meant to provide lessons for the reader. The following comment buttresses my argument for Asad as a mystic: "The theme of spiritual awakening undergoes a significant variation: it is shifted to the place of man's intellectual life and his search after ultimate truths. Appearance and reality are shown to be intrinsically different—so different that only mystic insight can reveal to us what is apparent and what is real." However, he is not a Sufi who is anti-worldly; rather, he reads from "the allegory of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn" that "world-renunciation is not, in itself, a necessary complement of one's faith in God." He elaborates: "Worldly life and power need not conflict with spiritual righteousness so long as we remain conscious of the ephemeral nature of all works of man and of our ultimate responsibility to Him who is above all limitations of time and appearance."[47]

While acknowledging a particular relevance of the sixth verse to the time of the Prophet, Asad is keen to point out that the lesson he derives from it "applies to everyone who, having become convinced of the truth of an ethical proposition, is dismayed at the indifference with which his social environment reacts to it."[48] This is an instance of Asad "universalizing" from a particular teaching. We can only speculate whether, given his rejection by and loss of the Saudi patronage for his work on the Qur'an, he felt suffocated and dismayed by the reception of his work in the "social environments" of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, leading him to take refuge in a cave. Asad,

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46 Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'ān: the Full Account of the Revealed Arabic Text Accompanied by Parallel Transliteration (London: Book Foundation, 2012), 486.

47 Asad, 486.

48 Asad, 488.

uniquely among the commentators that I have examined, reads the story of the cave as referring to the Qumran community of the Dead Sea Scrolls, who “devoted themselves entirely to study, the copying and the preservation of the sacred scriptures.” I wonder if Asad saw the importance of his work in this light and took solace from reading the Qur’anic story this way.

Asad acknowledges that most classical Qur’anic commentators “rely on this Christian legend.” He draws from Ibn Kathīr to argue that because Jewish rabbis from Medina suggested the three questions to the Meccans to ask the Prophet Muhammad, it would be more fitting if the answers to the questions referred to a Jewish community or group of youth. Asad is explicit: “If we discard the later syncretic additions and reduce the story to its fundamentals . . . we have before us a striking allegory related to a movement which played an important role in Jewish religious history during the centuries immediately preceding and following the advent of Jesus, namely, the ascetic Essence Brotherhood.”[49] Here, we see Asad actually seeking to identify particular individuals to which the Qur’anic narrative refers, but his unique identification relies on recent discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Still, even though the narrative refers to an actual community, Asad emphasizes that it is allegory, for in his approach, the Qur’an’s narratives provide morals. Asad could not be clearer on this point: “Whatever the source of this legend, and irrespective of whether it is of Jewish or Christian origin, the fact remains that it is used in the Qur’ān in a purely parabolic sense.”[50] He sees discussions regarding the number of years the group spent in the cave as moving in the wrong direction for interpreting and deriving the moral of the story. Instead of

49 Asad, 488. The fundamentals that Asad identifies are “voluntary withdrawal from the world, agelong ‘sleep’ in a secluded cave and a miraculous ‘awakening’ after an indeterminate period of time” (488).

50 Asad, 489.

"computing the time-span," he argues that the phrase *aḥsā* "does not merely signify 'he computed' or 'reckoned', but also 'he understood' or 'comprehended'," citing the Arabic lexicon of the nineteenth-century Indian scholar Zabīdī (d. 1792), *Tāj al-'Arūs*.[51]

Asad, again, is explicit:

> Since a "computing" of the time which those seekers after truth had spent in the cave could have no particular bearing on the ethical implications of this parable, 'aḥsā has here obviously the meaning of "better at comprehending" or "showing a better comprehension"—namely, of the spiritual meaning of the time-lapse between their "falling sleep" and their "awakening."[52]

He argues that the "purely earthbound character of the human concept of 'time'" as presented in the Qur'an is "deceptive" and "relative."[53] Asad emphasizes that "the Qur'an is never concerned with narratives for their own sakes."[54] He seeks to justify why the Qur'an ends the narrative of the cave "abruptly"; he does not see that as a problem because the Qur'an is concerned with providing moral guidance through allegories and parables, not to provide a complete history.

In his commentary, Asad offers several interpretations that advance a metaphorical and symbolic reading of elements. For example, in the story of Mūsā, there is the "unnamed sage," as

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51 For a study of Zabidi, see Stefan Reichmuth, *The World of Murtada al-Zabidi (1732–91): Life, Networks and Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Gibb Memorial Trust, 2009).

52 Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an,* 489.

53 Asad, 491n24, n26.

54 Asad, 491.

Asad puts it. He does not identify this figure until note 67, where he cites the Qur'anic formula of a "servant of God." While other commentators are very comfortable in saying his name is Khidr, only in note 73 does Asad finally name him: "This mysterious sage is spoken of as Al-Khaḍir or Ak-Khiḍr, meaning 'the Green One.' Apparently this is an epithet rather than a name . . . . We have here an allegoric figure symbolizing the utmost depth of mystic insight accessible to man."[55]

Asad also writes of how many "early commentators endeavored to 'identify' in geographical terms" the location where the two seas meet. He briefly mentions two but especially highlights the position of Baydawi that the "two seas" represent outward and inward or mystical knowledge: "one obtainable through the observation and intellectual coordination of outward phenomena ('ilm aẓ-ẓāhir), and the other through intuitive, mystic insight ('ilm al-bāṭin)—the meeting of which is the real goal of Moses' quest."[56] He points to how the fish is "an ancient religious symbol, possibly signifying divine knowledge or life eternal."57 He is very critical of the "innumerable legends" that have accumulated around this mysterious Khidr figure. Asad cites only one hadith, which he notes is recorded by the hadith collections of Bukhari, Muslim, and Tirmidhi, three of the most authoritative canonical hadith collections in Sunni Islam.[58] But even the hadith or "tradition," Asad argues, should be seen as "a kind of allegorical introduction to our Qur'anic parable."[59] He again shows his mystic side when he writes of the lesson in the encounter between

55 Asad, 500n73.

56 Asad, 499.

57 Asad, 499.

58 Asad, 499.

59 Asad, 499.

Moses and Khidr: “Appearance and reality do not always coincide.”[60] He elaborates: “Whatever he [Khidr] had done was done under the impulsion of a higher truth—the mystic insight which revealed to him the reality behind the outward appearance of things and made him a *conscious* particle in God’s unfathomable plan.”[61]

Another instance when Asad provides an allegorical reading as opposed to a literal, historical reading is in the narrative of Dhu ‘l-Qarnayn. Asad translates this name to mean “the Two-Horned One” or “He of the Two Epochs.” He interprets “horns” allegorically to “denote the two sources of power with which Dhu ‘l-Qarnayn is said to have been endowed: namely, the worldly might and prestige of kingship as well as the spiritual strength resulting from his faith in God.”[62] He rejects the view that this figure should be identified as Alexander the Great or Yemeni kings. “All these historic personages were pagans and worshipped a plurality of deities as a matter of course, where our Dhu ‘l-Qarnayn is depicted as a firm believer in the One God.” Asad concludes by echoing again what he sees as the takeaway or proper or most beneficial way to read these Qur’anic narratives: “We must, therefore, conclude that the latter has nothing to do with history or even legend, and that its sole purport is a parabolic discourse on faith and ethics, with specific reference to the problem of worldly power.”[63]

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60 Asad, 500.

61 Asad, 500n80.

62 Asad, 503n81.

63 Asad, 503n81.

He reiterates that identifying geographic and specific locations is "speculation" that can be dismissed as "irrelevant, the more so as the story of Dhu 'l-Qarnayn aims at no more than the illustration of certain ethical principles in a parabolic manner."[64] Lastly, Asad comments on the verses and traditions in relation to Yājūj and Mājūj, which he also translates as Gog and Magog because "it is the most logical to assume . . . that the terms Yājūj and Mājūj are purely allegorical, applying not to any specific tribes or beings but to a series of social catastrophes which would cause a complete destruction of man's civilization before the coming of the Last Hour."[65]

Thus, we see Asad's consistent preoccupation with or concern about metaphorical, parabolic readings of Qur'anic narratives. Asad is more than a modernist: he has a complicated relationship with Sufism and mystical readings while drawing from new discoveries and using his background and familiarity with the biblical literature to argue for the Qur'an as a rational, mystical scripture. Although at times he refers to historicity, he always cautions that that is not the Qur'an's primary concern. For Asad, allegorical or symbolic readings offer the richest interpretation of the Qur'anic message.

Mubarakpūrī's Abridged Commentary of Ibn Kathīr on Sura Kahf

Now we turn our attention to Ibn Kathīr's abridged commentary on the eighteenth chapter of the Qur'an, Sura al-Kahf. In the ten-volume Darussalam translation, this chapter is in the sixth volume, and it runs one hundred and fifteen pages.[66] Ibn Kathīr, as is his practice with every chapter

64 Asad, 504n94.

65 Asad, 505n100.

66 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, abridged by a group of scholars under the supervision of Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpūrī (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2000), 6:109–224.

of the Qur'an, first provides the hadith narrations regarding the virtues from the Prophet. These narrations single out the first or last ten verses of the chapter and state that their recitation or memorization will provide believers with protection from the Dajjāl or the anti-Christ. Some scholars have examined the increase in focus on the figure of the Dajjāl in contemporary Islamic discourse. Looking at both Christian and Muslim apocalypticism, Michael Sells points to its growth "during and after 1979," during which the world saw the Iranian revolution; a claim of the arrival of "the guided one" (the Mahdi) in Mecca and the attempted violent takeover during the pilgrimage season by Juhayman al-'Utaybi (1936–1980), which was put down with French military assistance; the formation of the Moral Majority in the United States; and, in the following year, the establishment of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, which was "guided by an apocalyptic vision" emerging from the US.[67] As David Cook notes, "Muslim apocalypticism is not only an important area of study in its own right; it is also part of the rapidly changing field of Qur'anic exegesis, as well as modern political and religious thought. Muslims' beliefs about the end of the world ultimately reflect their views both of themselves and of the direction of their society's development—the challenges it faces and how to overcome those challenges."[68]

In addition to this hadith regarding Sura Kahf serving as protection from the Dajjal, there is another hadith in which the Prophet describes the tranquility or *sakinah* that descended on one of his Companions as he was reciting this chapter. The Prophet is reported to have encouraged reciting this chapter on Fridays, for it will be a light of the Day of Resurrection—hence the practice

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67 Michael A. Sells, "Armageddon in Christian, Sunni, and Shia Traditions," in The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence, ed. Mark Huergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 469.
68 David Cook, Contemporary Muslim Apocalyptic Literature (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 2.

by many contemporary Muslims to try to recite this chapter on Fridays, sometimes at the mosque before the Friday communal prayers (*jum'ah*).

Ibn Kathīr provides a chain of narrators to Muhammad b. Isḥāq (d. 768), the famous compiler of prophetic biography, for the next story. Prophet Muhammad's Meccan tribe sends two of their members to the rabbis in the city of Medina to ask them about the Prophet Muhammad's claims and message. The rabbis are recognized by the Meccans as "the people of the first Book, and they have more knowledge of the Prophets than we do." This indicates respect and deference to the authority of the "People of the Book" (here, the rabbis), and the narration ultimately functions to strengthen the claims of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an as being from the same source (God), who has revealed to previous prophets such as Moses. The rabbis suggest three questions the Meccans should ask Muhammad, telling them, "If he answers them then he is a Prophet who has been sent (by Allāh); if he does not, then he is saying things that are not true, in which case how you will deal with him will be up to you."[69] The questions are about "some young men in ancient times," "a man who travelled a great deal and reached the east and the west of the earth," and the nature of the *rūḥ* (soul or spirit). The first two are in the chapter of the cave (al-Kahf), and the verses concerning the rūḥ are in the chapter directly preceding it (Q17), Sura 'Isrā' or Bani Isrā'īl. (As we have noted, Mawdudi has an alternative view regarding the third question).

The Meccans bring the three challenges from the rabbis to Prophet Muhammad, who responds immediately, "I will tell you tomorrow about what you have asked me."[70] However, the Prophet, according to the narration, does not receive any revelation the next day, nor for the next

69 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 6:113.
70 Ibn Kathīr, 6:113.

fourteen days. Finally, he receives the answers from God, but they come with an admonition to the Prophet to not say he will do anything the next day, except God willing (*illa an ya'shā' Allah*), from which Muslims derived the practice of saying *in sha Allah* (God willing/if God wills).

Ultimately, according to the narration, the Prophet is able to answer the three questions. The answers provide a significant amount of detail and even seek to adjudicate differing opinions among the People of the Book in the time of the Prophet, such as the number of companions in the cave, how many years they stayed in it, and details about where the traveler (named Dhul-Qarnayn) traveled and some of the conversations he had. These narrations are generally received by contemporary Muslims as further evidence of the Prophet Muhammad's complete reliance on God to answer questions with information that they believe he would not have otherwise known.

Ibn Kathīr, as we saw in the chapter of Joseph, addresses the time period and identity of individuals in the narrative:

> It has been mentioned that they were followers of the religion of Al-Masih 'Isa bin Maryam, but Allah knows best. It seems that they lived before the time of Christianity altogether, because if they had been Christians, the Jewish rabbis would not have cared about preserving this narration because of their differences . . . . This indicates that this story was something recorded in the books of the People of the Book, and that it came before Christianity. And Allah knows best.[71]

He does not say who mentions this opinion, but he expresses doubt about it and provides an argument for his position.

71 Ibn Kathīr, 6:121.

In an attempt to provide historical context to the narrative of the Companions of the Cave, or the Sleepers of Ephesus, Ibn Kathīr writes:

> Several of the earlier and later Tafsir scholars have mentioned that they were sons of the kings and leader of Byzantium . . . . They had an arrogant, tyrannical king who was called Decianus . . . . When they saw their people's actions with clear insight, they realized that the prostrations and sacrifices the people were offering to their idols should only be dedicated to Allah, Who Created the heavens and the earth. Each of them started to withdraw from his people and keep aloof from them.[72]

The Companions are identified as being in Byzantium, a name for the king is given, and idol worship as opposed to monotheistic worship of the Creator God is described. Perhaps providing these details is a function of Ibn Kathīr's role as a historian; if that term is to be applied to a premodern figure, we must distinguish the connotations between the modern discipline of history and the premodern narrative practice. Ibn Kathīr, like Ṭabarī, is a hadith master, but both have written "universal histories." This gives some context to Ibn Kathīr's repeated attempts to situate these Qur'anic narratives in time and place. This is a different approach from that of those who see the stories' moral lessons or abstractions as the most important aspect of the Qur'anic teachings. That approach does not give as much weight to historical chronology, who the ruler in this period was, what his name was, the physical setting in which the narratives took place, and so on. Those details figure prominently in the transmission-based (*naqlī*) approach, exemplified by

72 Ibn Kathīr, 6:122.

Tabari and Ibn Kathīr, in contrast with the *'aqlī* approach, exemplified by Rāzī, which investigates the implications of language in a more universal sense.

Ibn Kathīr continues:

> He [the king] commanded them to be stripped of their clothing bearing the adornments of their people, then he gave them some time to think about the situation, hoping they would return to their former religion. This was a way that Allah showed kindness for them, because during that time they managed to escape from him and flee from persecution for the sake of their religion. This is what is prescribed in the Shari'ah during times of trial and persecution—a person who fears for his religion should flee from his persecutors, as was reported in the Hadith: "Soon there will come a time when the best wealth any of you can have will be sheep, which he can follow to the tops of the mountains and places where rains falls, (fleeing) for the sake of his religion from persecution."[73] In such cases, it is allowed to seclude oneself from people, but this is not prescribed in any other case, because by such seclusion one loses the benefit of congregational and Friday prayers.[74]

Some features only get passing mention in the Ibn Kathīr abridgment, such as the king's persecution of and tyranny over these believers. Such themes figure much more prominently in the activist commentary of Mawdudi.

Ibn Kathīr comments on the location of the cave, but he argues for its lack of importance. This is interesting because location seems important to him in other places; for example, in the chapter of Yūsuf, where Canaan is not mentioned in the Qur'an, Ibn Kathīr identifies Canaan as the place from which Yūsuf and his brothers come. Elsewhere, too, even in the chapter of the cave, we see Ibn Kathīr's concern with identifying individuals and places and times that the Qur'anic narratives themselves do not deem worthy to identify. I am not sure if this dismissal

73 Quoted text cited as Ibn Hajar, *Fath Al-Bari* 7:11, p. 124.

74 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 6:124.

was just a lack of consistency or if there were polemics and investigations involved that he saw as missing the point too much. He writes:

> Allah has told us this, and He wants us to understand it and ponder its meaning, but He did not tell us the location of this cave, i.e. in which country on earth it is, because there is no benefit for us in knowing that, and no legislative objective behind it. If there was any spiritual or religious interest that could be served by our knowing that, Allah and His Messenger would have taught us about it, as the Prophet said: "I have not left anything that will bring you closer to Paradise and keep you further away from Hell but I have certainly taught you about it."[75]

Ibn Kathīr emphasizes the self-sufficiency of the Qur'an, hadith, and sunna, which the Salafi movement also emphasizes over, for example, Greek logic or philosophy or other religious traditions or cultural practices. Islam is presumed to be self-sufficient, with the texts of the Qur'an and sunna providing everything a true Muslim needs to live a God-pleasing life, which in this view should be the sole aim.

Ibn Kathīr provides many more details about this incident than the Qur'an does, including who the ruler was and the interactions the Companions of the Cave had with their society after they were awakened from their sleep. His role as a compiler of history from various sources intersects with his role as a commentator on the Qur'an.[76]

On another issue, Ibn Kathīr quotes a hadith that is not abridged but rather features prominently as it is in line with modern Salafis' concerns that contemporary Muslims have fallen into innovative practices and followed the example of previous religious communities, which they

75 Ibn Kathīr, 6:127; quoted text cited as Abdul-Razzaq, 11:125.
76 This is cited in the Darussalam version as Tarikh al-Tabari, 2:9, pp. 133–134.

were warned against. The hadith is translated as "Allah has cursed the Jews and the Christians who took the graves of their Prophets and righteous people as places of worship."[77] Another narration relates that when the third Sunni caliph, Umar, "found the grave of Danyal (Daniel) in Iraq during his period of rule, he gave orders that news of this grace should be withheld from the people, and that the inscription containing mention of battles, etc. that they found there should be buried."[78] Part of this opposition to practices around graves can be traced to Ibn Taymiyya, who targeted "saint veneration and tomb visitation."[79]

Ibn Kathīr also comments on Q18:28, which enjoins the Prophet to have patience in keeping the company of believers who are engrossed in the remembrance of God, even if they do not have many worldly possessions: "It was said that this was revealed about the nobles of Quraysh when they asked the Prophet to sit with them on his own, and not to bring his weak Companions with him, such as Bilal, 'Ammar, Suhayb, Khabbab, and Ibn Mas'ud. They wanted him to sit with them on his own, but Allah forbade him from doing that."[80] This narration is relevant to the issues of class division, power, and society, which are major themes for Qutb and Mawdudi, who comment on the justice of Islam and the stratification of society. However, in this Salafi abridgment of a medieval work, the incident is merely cited without explicitly elaborating on or drawing attention to its usefulness for addressing societal injustice.

Lastly, returning to the issue of biblical material, Ibn Kathīr states:

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77 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 6:135. It is cited in Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bari*, 1:634.

78 This is sourced identically with Ibn Kathīr's history work, *al-Bidayah wa al-Nihāya* 7:88, p. 135.

79 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 196.

80 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir ibn Kathīr*, 6:143–144.

> "Until, when he reached the setting place of the sun," means, he followed a route until he reached the furthest point that could be reached in the direction of the sun's setting, which is the west of the earth. As for the idea of his reaching the place in the sky where the sun sets, this is something impossible, and the tales told by storytellers that he travelled so far to the west that the sun set behind him are not true at all. Most of these stories come from the myths of the People of the Book and the fabrications and lies of their heretics.[81]

Ibn Kathīr strongly rejects a position due to its suspicious provenance. His stance contrasts with that of Muslim commentators who incorporated biblical material more freely into their understandings of the Qur'anic narratives and placed the Qur'an in conversation with those earlier scriptures and extra-scriptural literature.

Contemporary Interpretations of the Cave Chapter

After this study of these three main commentaries, here are brief overviews of some contemporary North American voices. In contrast to Mawdudi, Sayyid Abul Hasan Nadwi does not devote any attention to the identity of al-Khidr beyond stating that he was a man. He points out that Moses was simply "directed to meet a man more knowing than himself at a place where the two seas met."[82] Nadwi is also not concerned with where the incidents took place nor with references to biblical material. Furhan Zubairi describes Khidr as a "man of God."[83] He notes that the Qur'anic exegete al-Qurṭubī held that Khidr was a prophet but that the majority of Qur'anic

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81 Ibn Kathīr, 6:205.

82 Nadwi, 92.

83 Zubairi, *In the Company of the Quran*, 107.

exegetes disagreed; he held that the figure was "a very special and pious man of God." Zubairi emphasizes that details are left out in the Qur'anic narrative because "they're not that important. They actually take away from the main purpose, objective, and lessons of the story. We're supposed to focus on what lessons, morals, and guidance we can derive from these incidents and not worry about the minute details."[84] However, he notes a hadith that provides some details of the Qur'anic narrative found in the collections of Bukhārī and Muslim.[85]

Murad and Siddiqui: Sura Kahf as a Critique of Modernity

In 2010, The Islamic Foundation, a Muslim publishing house based in the UK, published a small book on the Cave chapter, entitled *Key to al-Kahf: Challenging Materialism & Godlessness.* This was co-authored by Khurram Murad (1932-1996) and Abdur Rashid Siddiqui (1932-2019). Murad and Siddiqui exemplify how contemporary Muslim authors reinterpret the Qur'an in order to make the message speak more directly to what they see as the concerns of their audience today. In the foreword, Siddiqui praises Murad's attempt to "present the Qur'an as a living reality, which even after fourteen hundred years is still relevant."[86] Murad served as the Director General of the Islamic Foundation and was trained as a civil engineer. He held leadership positions in the Jamaat-e Islam in Pakistan and widely published in English and Urdu. After Murad passed away in 1996, Siddiqui undertook the project to complete and update the work. Siddiqui served as Vice Chairman of the Islamic Foundation and worked as a librarian at the University of

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84 Zubairi, 108.

85 Zubairi, 108.

[86] Khurram Murad and Abdur Rashid Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf: Challenging Materialism and Godlessness* (Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2010), vii.

Leicester. He also has a number of Islamic publications in English that especially focus on the Qur'an, Iqbal and spirituality.

Their view of the modern relevance of the Qur'an is expounded in this way, "the Qur'an should be capable of being as much a part of our lives now as it was to its first recipients. In this respect, it still has the same urgent bearing upon our age and radiates the same deep relevance to our concern and experiences."[87] The authors recognize that a vast gulf exists between the context of seventh-century Arabia and the twenty-first century West, but they still posit that the Qur'an has "an eternal relevance for all people, being the Word of Eternal God."[88] As Johanna Pink has argued, the aspect of the Qur'an as guidance is particularly emphasized by reformists and revivalists Muslims from the eighteenth and nineteenth century onwards, which is a distinct shift in focus from the scholastic concerns of premodern exegetes. The authors take upon the duty to "translate each word of it [the Qur'an] in terms of our contemporary setting and bringing it to bear upon our own realities by breaking through the barriers of time, culture and change."[89] In this section, I would like to focus on aspects of Murad and Siddiqui's attempt to relate the meanings of al-Kahf to contemporary society and the challenges they perceive modern ideologies to pose for people of faiths, in particular Muslims.

In modernist fashion, they are critical of approaches to the Qur'an, such as certain devotional ones, that see the Qur'an as "a mere revered fossil or a source of magic-like

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[87] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, vii.
[88] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, vii.

[89] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, viii.

blessings."[90] Again, the authors emphasize that the Cave chapter "does not work like a magic wand to help us overcome the challenge of a materialistic civilization, but rather offers rational arguments.[91] Interestingly, relating back to our discussion of hadith and how hadith collections have been challenged or sifted through in the 19th and 20th centuries, Siddiqui takes out the references to hadith about the Dajjal (anti-Christ) that many commentaries, including contemporary ones, which center those narrations about Sura al-Kahf serving as protection from the Dajjal. Siddiqui in a mode of respectful critique writes, "With due respect to our very learned scholars, I have deliberately omitted the study of a hadith about Dajjal as this distracts our attention from al-Kahf's central message."[92] At the end of the book, he does have a three-page summary of key points in the appendix citing Sunni collections of hadith about the Dajjal, but these descriptions do not feature in the main text, although there is reference to a "Dajjalic system." The general reference to such a system allow for critique of modern, especially Western, developed societies and their norms, without fixating upon the figure of the Dajjal individually.

The modern challenges for a Muslim in the view of the authors are atheism, materialism[93], the scientific method, positivism, evolution[94], technology, nationalism,[95] and nihilism[96]. The

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[90] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, viii.

[91] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 18.

[92] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, xi.

[93] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 7.

[94] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 8.

[95] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 9.

[96] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 10.

authors even see the first phrase of the Qur'anic chapter which praises God by saying alhamdullilah as challenging the lack of meaning and denial of belief in God.[97] Similarly, saying the phrase 'if God wills', or inshaAllah, is seen as combating "disbelief and materialism" through acknowledgment of God's will[98]. This is distinctive in the modern period as premodern exegetes took a belief in God for granted and did not emphasize the significance of praise for God in this manner. For the authors, this chapter of the Qur'an "successfully repudiates secularism."[99]

There is an underlying activist thrust to the commentary: Muslims should not be passive or isolationists, but should rather engage in an active "struggle to shape the surrounding culture in line with their own values."[100] This, the authors argue, is a lesson from the example of the Companions of the Cave. A community and shared culture are required to combat the hostile forces of a "godless culture"[101] for while "man has the power to foster and influence a culture; but at the same time he is also shaped and moulded by his culture."[102] The Companions' contemporaries are taken to represent "an oppressive, dominant, secular culture which is out either to assimilate or eliminate them."[103] The host or dominant society is seen as "hostile" to the believers.[104] Modernity

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[97] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 11.

[98] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 17.

[99] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 11.

[100] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 22.

[101] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 22.

[102] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 23.

[103] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 14.

[104] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 14.

is seen as being anchorless, completely subject to change and lacking stability.[105] In this context, the authors argue that the Qur'an can serve as a "lighthouse"[106] amidst this confusion and rootlessness.

Materialism or an exclusive focus on improving the standards of living is critiqued as being insufficient to the comprehensive needs of humanity, who have spiritual and religious needs.[107] The narrative of the Owners of the Two Gardens is taken to be a parable contrasting a believer with that of a disbeliever who places all his hopes in his material possessions. This narrative is read as laying bare the "foundations of secular materialist culture and their hollowness."[108] The garden of the non-believing individual is interpreted by the coauthors as representing "industrial complexes," "yielding full economic benefit," "superior technology," with its "rate of growth,"; water is taken to be representative of "natural resources, raw materials and energy." This reading allows the authors to then engage in a postcolonial critique of developmental economics. "This is modern *shirk* and *kufr*" in the view of the authors.[109] Here we see how the parable of two individuals with their gardens and difference in material possessions become a foil by which to critique modern developmental economics and international relations. The narrative of Dhu al-Qarnayn, for them, poses a question and example about how "a just ruler dominating a vast empire should act? What is the role model for a 'super power' which instead of exploiting and oppressing

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[105] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 21.

[106] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 21.

[107] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 25-6.

[108] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 27.

[109] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 29.

weak and vulnerable nations tries to alleviate their problems and be a generous and benevolent force of goodness for humanity?"[110] They even have a post-colonial critique of the imposition of modernization upon those taken to be "primitive" by "the civilized world." In their telling, Dhu al-Qarnanyn "left them alone and did not try to interfere in their affairs or to 'modernize' them. Nor on the pretext of 'educating' them, destroy their culture and way of life."[111] "His 'aid' was not attached with any 'strings' thereby perpetuating his influence and exploiting the resources of a vulnerable nation."[112] (39)

Murad and Siddiqui refers to the figure of Khidr as a "servant of Allah" and provides a footnote citing Mawdudi: "According to authentic tradition, this person was called Khiḍr."[113] In their brief work, they do not discuss the individual's identity and whether he was a prophet or saint or angel (Mawdudi's position) but rather focus on what they take to be key lessons. Murad and Siddiqui also omit any mention of shrines, but this may be due to brevity rather than to an espousal of the permissibility of building shrines over the graves of pious individuals.[114]

Murad and Siddiqui avoid getting into the details of these narratives, especially those which are extra-Qur'anic. They write, "The Qur'an is not a book of history recounting events for the sake of record.[115] Instead of engaging in the debates that occupied other commentators regarding who

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[110] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 37.

[111] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 38.

[112] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 39.

113 Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 35.

114 Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 13–15.

[115] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 32.

Dhu al-Qarnanyn might have been, what time period, which region he ruled over, Murad and Siddiqui contend, "It is not necessary for our purpose to try to identify the exact person in an historical context or to apply all the details which the Qur'an has given about him. We have enough information about his character as well as about the resources available to him."[116]

In summary, Murad and Siddiqui present a contemporary commentary on the Cave chapter which ties together the narratives within the Qur'anic chapter with what they see as modern challenges for Muslims, particularly in relation to secular or atheist beliefs as well as in relation to worldly power and domination by others. It also serves as a commentary on colonialism and the desired relationship between Muslims and the West. These are distinct concerns which are not present in the traditional or classical Qur'anic exegesis, which often focus on linguistic and theological controversies of the medieval period.

A Scholarly Shi'I Interpreter: Tabataba'i

In this section of additional contemporary voices on the chapter of the Cave, I examine here the publication of the Shi'i Qur'anic commentary, *Al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur'an,* which is a partial translation of a twenty volume Arabic work by Allamah [meaning great scholar] As-Sayyid [meaning a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad] Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i (1904-1981). His work is an important representative of a significant school of thought present in American and global Islam.

Tabataba'i came from a scholarly religious family, studied in Najaf, Iraq, one of the most important centers of Shi'i religious learning, and taught in Qum, Iran, another important site for

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[116] Murad and Siddiqui, *Key to al-Kahf*, 37.

Shi'i seminaries. Some of the most important Shi'i clerics studied with him, including Murtada Mutahhari (1920-1979). The English translation of a volume of *Al-Mizan* features a quote from Mutahhari which captures the high regard and importance of this Qur'anic exegetical work in the eyes of this disciple: "Al-Mizan is the greatest exegesis of the Qur'an written since the advent of Islam, and that it will take another sixty or even one hundred years for our people to realize the greatness of Al-Mizan of Allamah Tabataba'i."

I first learned of it when I was a seminary student at Zaytuna Institute, where one of my friends and neighbors had a copy of this large encyclopedic work and praised it as most important, especially in addressing philosophical issues surrounding the Qur'an. In grad school, I also came across the importance of this work, especially its high regard in Shi'i and modern circles. It is the only modern work that the *Study Qur'an* draws from, and in fact, the editor-in-chief of that work, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, studied with Tabataba'i in Iran.

The importance of translation into English was realized by the World Organization of Islamic Studies based in Qum in 1982, and they started a project to translate this exegesis into English. This underscores the contemporary importance of English as an "Islamic" language or site of competing interpretations and influence among Muslims, as well as in introducing Shi'i voices to the West. The website almizan.org which features this translation online mentions how Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University requested at-Tabataba'i to write a book "to introduce Shiism to the West." In response, Tabataba'i wrote *Shi'ite Islam*.

The maintainers of the website also evidence keen awareness of criticisms of Islam and the Qur'an by Westerners and thus feel the need to add caveats and clarifications to controversial issues such as the "beating verse" of Q4:34, as well the punishment of flogging for adulterers. In

a point of critique of mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, whether of Shi'i or Sunni background, they argue that "the Qur'an does not stipulate stoning as a punishment for any group of people – whether unmarried or married." They attribute stoning to a Jewish practice in 7th century Arabia and speculate that flogging was prescribed in Islam as a deterrent to adultery and in replacement of the punishment of stoning from the Jewish practice. They conclude: "Unfortunately stoning became part of the shar'iah (law) through the controversial interpretation of Sunni and Shi'ite traditions but not through the Qur'an." Here, we see a contemporary move, to argue by the text of the Qur'an against some of the legal positions which Muslim jurists had adopted, arguing that they have no basis in the Qur'anic text. This, of course, leaves aside the question of examining the hadith collections, but the authors do not engage with that issue here.

Al-Mizan is a very scholarly work, engaging in linguistic analysis of Qur'anic terms, (often through al-Raghib al-Isfahani's linguistic Qur'anic work, al-Mufradat), and citing the relevant hadiths and other verses from the Qur'an. It also engages with theological and philosophical questions that many contemporaries would be interested in such as the assertion of free will and arguing against the possibility of God committing any act of injustice. Both of these positions are important foundational principles in Shi'i theology, especially in connection with core tenets of Mu'tazilism, which was a key school of thought in the Shi'i tradition. Given this Mu'tazili influence, it is not surprising that Tabataba'i frequently cites the Mu'tazili commentator, al-Zamakhshari. However, he is also not shy in differing from Zamaskhari in favor of the Shi'i commentator al-Tabrisi[117] (24). Another example of a theological doctrine in which Tabataba'i

[117] Allamah As-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur'an*, trans. Salim Rossier (Sydney, Australia: Tawheed Institute Australia, 2014), 24.

actually disagrees with the Mu'tazili position is regarding the will of God in relation to "a legislative will" or acts of obedience to God.[118]

In distinction to the Sunni works I have examined, Tabataba'i's work heavily draws from classical Shi'i works such as *Majma al-Bayan,* the exegetical works of Ayyashi and Qummi, and the positions of the Shi'i Imams. Some of these quotations and sources explicitly advocate reading Qur'anic verses in particular praise of Imam Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muhammad.[119] Tabataba'i also exhibits confidence to freely criticize some of the position of previous exegetes and presents arguments in support of his position against theirs. He openly advocates discarding some of these positions. For example, "Other reasons have been mentioned as to why the story of the Companions of the Cave has been appended to the preceding verses, but they are not worth mentioning."[120] He frequently paraphases the Qur'anic verses under discussion and presents them in a clear manner, emphasizing lessons for contemporary Muslim readers.

Similar to Mawdudi, Tabataba'i argues that the three questions that the Jewish people of Medina posed to test the claims of the Prophet Muhammad were regarding the Companions of the Cave, the story of Moses and his servant with Khidr, and the story of Dhu l-Qarnayn. This position differs from the position of most who hold that the third question was in relation to the nature of the soul, which is mentioned in the seventeenth chapter of the Qur'an. However, at-Tabataba'i's approach is to focus on lessons and principles from the Qur'anic narratives as opposed to trying to

[118] Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan,* 65.

[119] Tabataba'i, 13.

[120] Tabataba'i, 20.

situate them in historical time and place, which we have seen, has been a focus of some commentators, such as Mawdudi and Ibn Kathīr. Tabataba'i also cites the practice of taqiyya or dissimulation or hiding one's belief in relation to the practice of the Companions of the Cave in order to survive in a time of persecution for monotheistic belief.[121] This makes sense, given that Shi'i Islam, as an often persecuted minority tradition within broader Muslim communities, often had to engage in dissimulation. It is something which the Sunni commentaries I examine do not mention in relation to the narrative.

Tabataba'i also is unique in situating the debate that occurred in the wake of the Companions of the Cave/Sleepers which the Qur'an mentions as a debate between monotheists who believed in the resurrection of the soul and body, and polytheists who rejected resurrection, but "may have instead believed in reincarnation"[122] I have not seen the concept of reincarnation dealt with in the other commentators I have examined, and even here, it is merely alluded to, rather than engaged with in detail.

Causality has been the subject of some contemporary conversations in Muslim circles especially as they grapple with modern scientific explanations of the universe and its workings. One example of the philosophical issues Tabataba'i engages with is a discussion of whether anything in the cosmos has an independent ability for causation or effect. at-Tabataba'i is against this view, arguing that "People can only do or effect what God wills them to do, in the sense that He gives them control, instead of taking control away from them and willing the opposite."[123] God

[121] Tabataba'i, 33, 47-8 and 83.

[122] Tabataba'i, 52.

[123] Tabataba'i, 61-2.

gives apparent causes "the ability to engage in cause and effect" meaning facilitation and permission that apparent "natural" causes are allowed to have an effect.

Previously, we have seen how some of the Qur'anic exegetes have varied in their interpretation of how many years the Companions of the Cave slept for. Tabataba'i holds the view that the numbers of 300 and 309 are merely citing the position of Jews and Christians is a mistaken view. Remember, this is in contrast with Mawdudi, who tries to reconcile the Qur'anic narrative with Edward Gibbon's view of this "legend". Tabataba'i demonstrates no such concern to align with Gibbon or other Western narrations of this episode. However, the editors or translators into English do display awareness of the Western narratives. They state that there are four versions of the narrative of Companions of the Cave and attribute them to Syriac, Greek, Latin and "the Islamic narration attributable to the Syriac." He is also very critical of some of the hadith reports that previous exegetes have cited in relation to some of the Qur'anic narratives, pointing out what he sees as problems with these narrations.[124] He openly states that Muslims acquired narratives from Jews and Christians that were embellished and exaggerated and then wrongly treated as if they were authentic statements of the Prophet Muhammad.[125] This fits with the earlier discussion of the contemporary criticism of the embrace of "Biblical literature" or Isra'iliyaat, which many previous Qur'anic exegetes did not problematize.

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[124] Tabataba'i, 86.

[125] Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan*, 92.

Tabataba'i identifies the figure as al-Khiḍr, "one of the prophets contemporary to Moses."[126] He further comments, "Some say that God bestowed longevity upon him and so he is still alive, having never died. There is no harm in what has been said thus far because there is no incontrovertible rational or textual evidence to contradict it . . . . There are many stories and tales about sightings of him but in spite of that, the narrations and stories are not free of fabricated or interpolated yarns."[127] Tabataba'i asserts the position that Khiḍr was a prophet and entertains the possibility that he continues to live, a position we saw Qadhi strongly disagree with. At the same time, Tabataba'i recognizes the lack of authenticity in some of the material that has been passed down regarding Khiḍr. Interestingly, the contemporary Shī'ī exegete and philosopher Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i does not comment on the issue of building shrines,[128] which are important sites of veneration in Shī'ī practice.

In summary, Tabataba'i represents a very scholarly exegesis of the Cave chapter, that is from a Shi'i scholar, but yet overlaps much with the Sunni commentaries examined in this dissertation. There is a broad agreement among many contemporary Muslim scholars to reexamine some of the exegetical material and question its proverance. Like some of the scholarly Qur'anic commentators, at-Tabataba'i quotes Arabic poetry in support of some interpretations and investigations of their usage and literary implications. This scholarly investigation is not a prominent feature of most of the other commentaries examined in this dissertation. The scholarly

126 Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan*, 173.

127 Tabataba'i, 173.

128 Allamah As-Sayyid Muhammad Husayn At-Tabataba'i, *Al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur'an*, trans. Salim Rossier (Sydney, Australia: Tawheed Institute Australia, 2014), 101–104.

side to Tabataba'i's commentary can be seen in the citation of Arabic poetry to buttress some of the intricate linguistic analysis of specific words and their connotations. The scholastic side can also be seen in the confidence the author exhibits to strongly disagree with prominent classical exegetes and to offer arguments for the positions that the author takes.

A "Post-Salafi" Reading of Sura al-Kahf by Yasir Qadhi

In 2020, Dr. Yasir Qadhi published a two-hundred-page book on Sura al-Kahf which features the Arabic verses of Sura al-Kahf, a translation of the verses, and his commentary. It features neat divisions of the sura with chapter headings. His book is based on a transcript of a series of talks he gave on Sura al-Kahf in Ramadan that is available on YouTube. Qadhi, is an American Muslim of Pakistani descent. He studied engineering in Texas, before spending ten years at the Islamic University of Medina, before completing his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies at Yale University. He currently is the president of the Islamic Seminary of America as well as a scholar-in-residence at an Islamic center in Texas. Although he studied with Salafi scholars in Medina, in 2014, he wrote an article on the popular Muslim Matters website where he outlined what he viewed as some of the positive aspects of the movement as well as its shortcomings.[129]

One of the points Yasir Qadhi makes in his introduction to the narrative of "the People of the Cave" is to note that the Qur'an is distinctive from other scriptures, which he says, have "superfluous details, from genealogy to beyond, that are not needed." In contrast, the Qur'an is seen as focusing on "the essentials of the story" and "does not contain any details that we don't

[129] Yasir Qadhi, "On Salafi Islam," *Muslim Matters*, April 22, 2014. https://muslimmatters.org/2014/04/22/on-salafi-islam-dr-yasir-qadhi/4/

need to know."[130] The Qur'an is also highlighted as "the ultimate proof" of Islam,[131] as well as "our metaphorical cave," whose recitation will result in "our protection."[132] Despite making the point of the Qur'an's focus, Qadhi does not what Qur'anic commentators have tried to fill in in terms of details, such as the location of events and who the individuals involved were, which are not explicitly spelled out in the Qur'anic text. For example, Qadhi engages with various theories of who the Companions of the Cave were and the similarities and differences with narratives of the "Seven Sleepers of Ephesus" with which he identifies the narrative as most probable.[133] For the narrative of Dhul Qarnayn at the end of the sura, Qadhi firmly disagrees with the notion that this individual should be identified as Alexander the Great.[134] He also engages in a brief discussion of the figures of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj (Gog and Magog) and highlights how the hadiths surrounding them will be viewed as problematic for "a modern mind."[135]

An emphasis on rationality and intelligibility can clearly be discerned as he further elaborates on the youths demand for evidence, proofs and arguments for their beliefs writing, "our religion is one based upon evidence."[136] The complementariness of hope and fear in Qur'anic passages is presented as "the logical form of religion."[137] Although the Salafi background Qadhi

[130] Yasir Qadhi, *Sūrah al-Kahf* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2020), 29.

[131] Qadhi, *Sūrah al-Kahf*, 17.

[132] Qadhi, 67.

[133] Qadhi, 52-53.

[134] Qadhi, 173.

[135] Qadhi, 193.

[136] Qadhi, 40.

[137] Qadhi, 118.

was trained in is often seen as simple strict adherence to the dictates of scriptures and literalism, the demand for proofs (*adilla*) can also be seen as a function of the increased emphasis upon religious beliefs and actions based on a type of rationality. In Qadhi's words, "The Qur'an is full of ways of addressing our intellects."[138]

However, Qadhi cautions against "argumentation or philosophizing too much" as frivolous.[139] Again, "too much questioning will lead you to find ways to block the truth, and this is not the way of the believers."[140] Thus, while a certain place is recognized for intellectual arguments, there is also an understanding of the limitations of argumentation and the need to simply submit to God and engage in actions, especially worship of God.

Qadhi emphasizes taking both material and physical means in addition to praying to God.[141] He writes, "Our religion is a religion of action." This especially may resonate with Muslims who feel a need to push back against the accusations of relying on "fatalism," which is a critique that some non-Muslim writers used in their descriptions of Muslims, and which some Muslims also absorbed, often blaming understandings of Sufism to proliferating attitudes that were seen as passive. Qadhi makes the point that trusting God "does not mean they should act foolishly,"

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[138] Qadhi, 78.

[139] Qadhi, 115.

[140] Qadhi, 116.

[141] Qadhi, 31.

but rather deliberately and with planning.[142] Again, Qadhi emphasizes that "there is a cause and effect"—when the youths stood up and took action, God blessed them and strengthened them.[143]

Qadhi also displays a great deal awareness of the critiques of Islam that are posed by contemporaries, including regarding the severity of punishment in the afterlife as well as the pleasures of Paradise.[144] In response, he cites a hadith that states that the main thing that God demands is recognition of God's divinity and unity.[145] As for Paradise, Qadhi emphasizes that there are pleasures beyond physical ones, such as "connection with Allah: to look at Him and to hear His speech."[146] He argues that many of the wishes and desires people have are related to their inherent nature and it is to this nature that the Qur'an appeals to in its description of the joys of Paradise.[147]

Qadhi utilizes verse 22 of al-Kahf which refers the Prophet and believers to God's knowledge to highlight the importance of knowledge and study in the practice of teaching Islam, calling others to it and responding to argumentation about its truth claims.[148] Although all Muslims can preach by example, engaging in debate requires firmer grounding in the Islamic scholarly tradition. He emphasizes learning from Muslim scholars and recognizing the need for expertise,

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[142] Qadhi, 49.

[143] Qadhi, 39.

[144] Qadhi, 72.

[145] Qadhi, 72.

[146] Qadhi, 73.

[147] Qadhi, 74.

[148] Qadhi, 57-8.

just as training in secular knowledge is seen as necessary qualifications for an engineer or doctor.[149] This speaks to the contemporary "democratization" of Islamic knowledge and the rise of a modern educated class of Muslims who have not received scholarly training in the Islamic sciences.[150]

Qadhi uses the narrative of the People or Companions of the Cave who are described as youths to highlight the special place of young men in resisting injustice.[151] This is an appealing message, especially for the young people of his audience. Qadhi writes, "When young, the mind is more open, and to this day we witness that those who fight for social justice and causes or speak out against the injustices of the government or society are often the student community."[152] However, it is not blanket praise of youths, as he also highlights that "just as youth can be a force for good, it can be also be a force for harm."[153] His emphasis is still on the positive potential of youths. He comments on the twenty eighth verse to emphasize that the Prophet is instructed to tend to believers, regardless of their social class.[154] Those "who are meek" are especially vehicles for God's help.[155] The Meccan disbelievers are critiqued for being "too arrogant to sit with the lower classes among the Muslims."[156] Though he does not elaborate or spell this out, this can have

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[149] Qadhi, 140.

[150] On this issue, see Jonathan Brown, "Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not? Salafis, The Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema," *Journal of Islamic Studies,* Vol. 26, No. 2 (May 2015), 117-144.

[151] Qadhi, 33.

[152] Qadhi, 33.

[153] Qadhi, 33-4.

[154] Qadhi, 68.

[155] Qadhi, 69.

[156] Qadhi, 108.

special resonance in the highly stratified circumstances of inequality and disparities of the modern world, especially in the Global South or "Third world." He critiques the blanket pursuit of wealth, emphasizes the temporality of this worldly life and teaches that true wealth is in attaining Paradise.[157] This world should be used by Muslims as "a stepping stone to get to the next world."[158] This presentation stands in stark contrast with a materialist worldview that only views life as that which is between one's birth and death, without a notion of an afterlife, which sharply goes against the prevalent secular mindset of contemporaries.

In passing, Qadhi mentions a theological controversy in early Islam about whether faith (*īmān*) increases or decreases or stays stable. Without getting into the nuances of this debate, he cites Imām Bukhārī as using a verse from Sura al-Kahf as a proof text for his position that faith does increase and decrease according to one's actions.[159] Another theological debate Qadhi mentions is regarding free will and God's control. He distinguishes human beings from robots and emphasizes the choice that human beings have.[160]

Qadhi is very critical of certain "mystical" views regarding the figure of Khidr, especially as "a saint or holy man," who lives forever. This view holds that "he's alive right now and visits the sheikhs, *pirs* and *awliyā'*, and teaches them a secret knowledge."[161] He attributes this view to "many – if not all – of the mystical groups." He states that such a view "has no shred of evidence

[157] Qadhi, 96 and 100-1.

[158] Qadhi, 102.

[159] Qadhi, 35.

[160] Qadhi, 70.

[161] Qadhi, 126-7.

in the Qur'an and Sunnah, nor in common sense, reason and intellect."[162] He cites a Qur'anic verse that states the mortality of all individuals and argues that it is not possible that Khidr as a saint would have more knowledge than Moses who was a prophet. [163] He cites Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Kathīr as "real researchers" who held that Khidr was also a prophet.[164] He again criticizes what he calls "superstitious tales and legends that Khidr was a green-turbaned figure, flying in the air who visits people."[165] He swears by God, that "our religion is more sensible than this myth!"[166] These critiques, of course, would be contested by many Sufis.[167]

The lament about Sufism and grave veneration in relation to the mention of the place of prostration (*masjid*) relating to the Companions of the Cave has much in common with many Salafi and Deobandi reform-minded Muslims who are pushing back against what they see as innovation or *bid'a.* In fact, the South Asian twentieth-century reformer and activist Nadwi cites the Iraqi nineteenth-century exegete Alūsī as being definitive in his condemnation of the construction of shrines. The verse is not a proof for the permissibility of such constructions, Alūsī writes, but rather "only tells us what had then happened and does not at all justify their emulation."[168] This

[162] Qadhi, 127.

[163] Qadhi, 127.

[164] Qadhi, 128.

[165] Qadhi, 129.

[166] Qadhi, 129.

[167] For an exploration of some of the Sufi perspectives on the narrative of Khidr and Moses, see ugh Talat Halman, *Where Two Seas Meet: Al-Khidr and Moses— The Qur'anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model for Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013).

168 Nadwi, 58, citing Alūsī, 5:31–32.

polemic is part of a broader contestation over building shrines and seeking blessings (baraka) at their sites, which has been well noted in the literature on modern Islam.[169]

Yasir Qadhi places greater importance on details in his presentation of this hadith and writes that "we cannot just open the Qur'an and interpret it without referring to the Sunnah. It is impossible to understand the Qur'an without knowing the Sunnah. We would not know the details of this story if we don't go back and see what details our Prophet gave."[170] These differences demonstrate how prominent hadiths are invoked in Qur'anic commentaries and the attention and importance the commentators place on certain details.

Qadhi writes that "the Qur'anic phrasing *qalā al-lathīna ghalabū* [those who prevailed] seems to indicate a level of distaste regarding the final decision to build a place of worship. And this reflects the Islamic point of view, which is that we do not build mosques over the graves of righteous people." Qadhi cites a hadith condemning those "who take graves as places of worship" and adds, "The reason mosques and graves do not occupy the same space is that this is the easiest stepping stone to venerating a grave. And so we do not build a mosque over a grave, and neither do we bury a person within a mosque."[171] Qadhi is perhaps tempered in this part of his Qur'anic commentary, stating his position without explicitly calling out the reality of shrine veneration; however, he is absolute in his reference to "the Islamic point of view," not acknowledging that a difference of views exists regarding venerating righteous people as well as their burial places.

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169 See, for example, Georg Stauth and Samuli Schielke, eds., *Dimensions of Locality: Muslim Saints, Their Place and Space* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008).

170 Qadhi, *Lessons from Surah al-Kahf*, 126.

171 Yasir Qadhi, *Lessons from Sūrah al-Kahf* (Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing, 2020), 54.

Chapter 5: Contestation over Qur'anic Commentaries among American Muslims Today

This chapter examines highlights the popularity in the American Muslim community of the three Qur'anic commentaries and some of the challenges and contestations over them in the last few decades. Particular attention is drawn to the question of state patronage, which amplified certain commentaries with wide circulation while decreasing the standing of others. Contestations also exist in the broader contexts of new sources of authority and education outside of traditional Islamic seminaries and a growing reading public, both in postcolonial conditions and those found in the experience of immigration to the West.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the publication of translations of Islamist commentaries such as Qutb and Mawdudi, which were enormously popular, especially among postcolonial Muslims. These commentaries were challenged by a different approach exemplified by Muhammad Asad's translation and commentary, which drew from classical commentaries and emphasized a rationalist approach to the Qur'an and Islam. However, based on my conversations with some American Muslim community leaders and scholars in New York, Chicago, and California and my observation of some online discussions, I find that Asad's commentary, after enjoying some popularity among educated Western Muslims, lost favor in some parts of the community. This was especially true after the rise of critiques that viewed his commentary as infused with unwarranted rationalist views that were not consistent with the transmitted hadiths, which were increasingly valued as the prized way to approach tafsīr. Mawdudi's work is especially recommended and read in circles affiliated with the organization he established, the Jaamat-e-Islami. The growth of the Salafi movement, with increasing Saudi funding and dissemination of Salafi-approved or -

influenced works, led to the publication of an abridged translation of *Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*. Based on my observations, this tafsīr, as I note later in this chapter, continues to be the most frequently referred-to commentary among American Muslims. This hold or dominance has been slightly challenged by the *Study Qur'an* and publication of partial commentaries from classical works. These contestations over the authority of various works of tafsīr are important windows into the types of interpretation of the Qur'an that are influential among contemporary Muslims.

Reception of Mawdudi's Commentary

While I personally did not grow up reading Mawdudi, I have found that some of my family and community members from the older generation were incredibly impacted by his thought and ideas. My own assessment of Mawdudi was influenced by reading the Bangladeshi British writer Ed Husain, who writes of his journey in turning his back on his parents' Sufi Fultuli background, joining the political Hizb ul Tahrir movement, and then finding his way back to an appreciation of "traditional Islam," especially through teachers like Shaykh Hamza Yūsuf. Husain is largely critical of what he and Yūsuf call "political Islam," influenced especially by thinkers such as Qutb and Mawdudi. They broadly argue that Sufism and "classical Islam" have much to offer to correct what they see as the imbalances of "movement Islam." This points to a broader pushback in contemporary Islam, which I will return to, against some of the postcolonial readings of the Qur'an and Islam, as well as Salafi readings, that were popular in an earlier generation, including among immigrant Muslim communities in the West.

Mawdudi continues to be an important voice, even for diasporic Muslims including American Muslims. My father, who reads Bangla, has several volumes of Mawdudi's works in Bangla on his bookshelf at home, as do many South Asian immigrants. When I asked him what they were, I was surprised to learn that, among the texts of translations into Bangla of tafsīr and

collections of hadith, there was Mawdudi’s *Tafhim al-Qur’an*, translated from the original Urdu. He praised the work’s organization and its presentation of the material in an accessible and powerfully moving way. I was also surprised to learn that one of my father’s closest friends, who had a tremendous impact on him and the religious orientation of my family, was also an avid reader of Mawdudi’s works. This friend was especially active in the work of Jamaat-e Tabligh in New York City and New Jersey.

I also discovered that another Bangladeshi New Yorker, who works as an anesthesiologist, avidly reads Mawdudi’s *Tafhim al-Qur’an* in English and praises it extensively. I highlight his occupation and my father’s best friend’s legal background to underscore the resonance of Mawdudi’s modern commentary for Muslim professionals with a modern education. Mawdudi’s writings speak to many contemporary Muslims who have been shaped by modern forces precisely because he speaks to modern concerns and tries, to the degree he can, to incorporate elements of modern knowledge.

A Muslim American scholar shared with me how, growing up in Missouri, he and his parents, both doctors, would go to a weekly gathering of other Pakistani Muslim professionals, where they engaged in a study of the Qur’an through reading Mawdudi’s *Tafhim al-Qur’an*. Another American Muslim from Kenosha, Wisconsin, told me how, despite his trying to introduce his parents to other classical or medieval works of Qur’anic exegesis, his parents put away these classics and instead continued their practice of reading daily from Mawdudi’s commentary, which they could read in the original Urdu. They felt that it resonated with them and presented a modern, confident interpretation of the Qur’an that highlighted how its message was relevant to the challenges of today.

Mawdudi and his political engagements shaped how he and his works were received amid the controversies surrounding Jamaat-e-Islami,[1] especially in the context of 1971 Bangladesh.[2] More broadly, there is the contestation in contemporary Islam over who is seen as having the authority to interpret the Qur'an. As an example of this, I remember how, when I reviewed my memorization of the Qur'an at the Deobandi madrasa, Darul Uloom New York in Jamaica, Queens, my Qur'an memorization teacher forbade the reading of Mawdudi's books. This is indicative of how many Deobandis take issue with Mawdudi, even though Mawdudi worked and studied with Deobandi scholars, especially at the beginning of his writing career. As a further example of the strong opposition to Mawdudi and what he represents, my father recalled how a religious scholar in his village in Sylhet, Bangladesh, held that if someone does not consider Mawdudi to be a disbeliever (*kafir*), he himself is a disbeliever![3] Another religious scholar from my father's circle shared how he neither condemns nor praises Mawdudi but will read and benefit from Mawdudi's commentary, indicating a more neutral stance toward his works and thought.

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[1] For a study of the politics of the Jama'at-i Islami, see Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Vanguard of the Islamic Revolution: The Jama'at-i Islami of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), esp. "The Secular State, 1958-1971," (147-169) and "The Bhutto Years, 1971-1977," (170-187). See also, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), especially Chapter 3 "The "'Ulama and the State," (95-134) and Chapter 4, "Islamism and the Sovereignty of God" (135-163).

[2] For a brief account of the history of Bangladesh and in particular of the events of 1971, see Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. "The Pakistan experiment," 107-120 and "Pakistan fall aparts," 121-130, and Meghna Guhathakurta & Willem van Schendel (eds.), *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), esp. "Partition and Pakistan," 157-220, and "War and Independence," pp. 221-290. For a study focused on 1971 from an international angle, see Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). For an account of the massacre and rape of women, see Yasmin Saikia, *Women, War and the Making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011). During the war of independence for Bangladesh in June 1971, Mawdudī supported "the conduct of the Pakistani troops in the eastern wing," meaning East Pakistan, or what would go on to become Bangladesh. His organization, the Jamaat-e-Islami, "established paramilitary groups that worked in tandem with the military in countering the insurgency." Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan*, 236. The ruling political party following independence, the Awami League, and their supporters have been very opposed to the influence of Mawdudi and Jamaat-e-Islami affiliated scholars and movements.

[3] Most Sunni Muslims caution against *takfir*, the practice of declaring a Muslim a non-Muslim (analogous to excommunication in the Christian context).

Mawdudi and Some American Muslim Organizations

Mawdudi had a profound impact among various American Muslims, including the leaders of organizations such as ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), MSA (Muslim Student Association), and especially ICNA (Islamic Council of North America). ISNA leaders were inspired by Revivalist Islamist thinkers such as Mawdudi, Qutb, and Hasan al-Banna.[4] The literature that these organizations disseminated was "written from a normative perspective by members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-e-Islami."[5] As Yale historical anthropologist Zareena Grewal documents, "The leaders of the umma institutions such as the MSA and ISNA in the seventies and eighties primarily looked to public intellectuals and revivalists in the Middle East [such as Mawdudi and the Egyptian Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaradawi[6]] for political and religious advice."[7]

ICNA and its youth branch, MYNA (Muslim Youth of North America), hold study circles in which they closely read and discuss Mawdudi's commentary on the Qur'an, which is available on the Internet and widely accessed and distributed.[8] An American Muslim who converted in the 1990s shared with me how he found Mawdudi, the first tafsīr that he read, extremely engaging. Mawdudi enjoyed a wide reception precisely because he wrote for audiences with modern college

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[4] Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 79, citing Ihsan Bagby, "Is ISNA an Islamic Movement?," *Islamic Horizons*, March 1986, 4.

[5] Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West,* 79, citing Yvonne Haines Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 124.

[6] Qaradawi, in fact, led the funeral prayer for Mawdudi, highlighting the prolific activist's international reach and transnational connections.

[7] Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: New York University, 2014), 141.

[8] See, e.g., The Quran Explorer, https://thequranexplorer.com/tafsir/tafheem-ul-quran, EnglishTafsir.com, http://www.englishtafsir.com/, and SearchTruth.com, https://www.searchtruth.com/tafsir/tafsir.php.

educations, and he engaged, especially through his own wide readings, with modern findings in various disciplines, from economics to sociology, psychology, archaeology, history, and science. Another Pakistani American Muslim shared how Mawdudi was known to welcome young university students to his home to debate various issues, which he welcomed with an animated spirit. This new class of young Muslim professionals found that Mawdudi's thoughts resonated with them, were relevant, and attempted to take on the challenges of how Islam should be interpreted in the modern age, and not simply by parroting what could be found in classical works, which were generally written for madrasa students and largely inaccessible to those with only modern college education.

Mawdudi was widely read by Western Muslims in English, Persian, and Arabic translations. Simon Fuchs has recently argued that attention ought to be paid to the "bidirectional flows of religious thought between the Middle East and South Asia."[9] We can complicate this and advocate for a multidirectional flow of influence and conversation among multiple locations, including Muslims in the West, especially in the United States.[10] The English translation of Mawdudi's Qur'anic commentary started to appear in 1967, translated by Zafar Ishaq Ansari (1932–2016).[11] English translations have been published by Markazi Maktaba Islami Publishers

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[9] Simon Wolfgang Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land: Shi'ism between Pakistan and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2019), 190.

[10] Nile Greens draws attention to this and other aspects of Western Muslims' influence on Muslims in Muslim-majority countries in his "Spacetime and the Muslim Journey West: Industrial Communications in the Making of the 'Muslim World,'" *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 2 (April 2013): 401–429.

[11] Ansari served as vice president and as a professor at the International Islamic University in Islamabad starting in 1986, in addition to teaching at a number of universities in the West and in Muslim-majority countries. He completed his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Islamic studies from McGill University in 1966, in addition to an M.A. degree in economics from the University of Karachi. He directed the Islamic Research Institute in Islamabad, which Fazlur Rahman had previously directed. He was associated with the student branch of the Jamaat-I Islam organization of Mawdudi and wrote several personal and laudatory articles about him, including "Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi: An Introduction to His Vision of Islam and Islamic Revival," in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi*, ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari and Khurshid Ahmad (Leiciester and Jeddah: The Islamic Foundation and Saudi Publishing House, 1979), 359–383.

in Delhi and the Islamic Foundation in the United Kingdom. Mawdudi's works have been widely read by Muslim international students in the United States who were involved in activism and established organizations such as ICNA.

Mawdudi aimed to reach "ordinary educated Muslims."[12] He was a reformist or revivalist in the sense that he believed that "ignorance of true Islam was rampant among Muslims, and especially among those educated in westernized institutions of learning."[13] But he especially targeted Muslims educated in Western or Western-modeled institutions of higher learning as his intended audience. He focused on convincing them that his own vision of Islam was the most fitting and compelling. He tried to make Islam make sense to them and stand in the face of critique, especially from Westerners and secular-minded Muslims. Islam, in his articulation, was not a relic of the past, as modern secular elites saw it, or simply a cultural artifact. Mawdudi believed that Islam, properly understood, could provide contemporary Muslims not only with meaningful answers to the pressing challenges of the day but also with the ethical and moral foundations on which to build a truly Islamic nation-state.

Mawdudi traveled widely outside of India and Pakistan. His relationship to the Saudis—in a Cold War against Iran—and the Egyptian president Nasser's advocacy of socialism are worth highlighting. On the one hand, Mawdudi's works were translated into Farsi (Persian) by Khomeini in 1963.[14] On the other hand, with the rise of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry,[15] "Mawdudi shared the

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[12] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56.

[13] Roxanne Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 82.

[14] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 153, citing Ervand Abrahamain, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982); *Khomenism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: St. Martin's 1999).

[15] For one study of Cold War rivalries, see Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Struggle for Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Saudi ruling elite's misgiving about secular nationalism and the desire to counter it with a reinvigorated pan-Islamism."[16] He was on the board of advisors for the establishment of the new Islamic University of Medina in 1963,[17] and he received the first King Faysal [r. 1964–1975] Award in recognition of his service for Islamic causes. The International Islamic University in Islamabad was partly supported by Saudi largesse and staffed by some of Mawdudi's students.[18] Part of Mawdudi's tremendous influence in the Muslim world was due to his works being translated into Arabic through an office dedicated to this task and devotees writing in Arabic journals and disseminating his ideas.[19]

Mawdudi's works were translated into Arabic and circulated in Saudi Arabia. They started to be read in Egypt in 1951.[20] His work was influential in the years leading up to the Iranian Revolution, with the return of Khomeini from exile in Paris.[21] Khomeini's writings and recordings reached the United States, as did those of the Iranian Shariati and, to a lesser extent, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), who critiqued what he saw as the "Westoxification" or Gharbzadegi of colonized Muslims.[22] Postcolonial Muslims in this Cold War context were grappling with

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[16] Euben and Zaman, Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought, 84.

[17] Ahmad and Ansari, "Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi," 364; Michael Farquhar, "Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital, and the Islamic University of Medina: A Wahhabi Missionary Project in Transnational Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 2015): 701–721; Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam,* 156, 247n42. Zaman references "The Sketch of an Islamic University," which Mawdudi presented to the Saudi government, citing Mawdudi's *Ta'limat* (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1972), 165–176.

[18] Zaman, Islam in Pakistan, 276.
[19] Zaman, 160–161.

[20] Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 106.

[21] For a brief account of Mawdudi's successor to the leadership of the Jamaat-I Islam, Tufayl Muhammad, and his visit to Tehran following the 1979 revolution, see Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 121.

[22] See his Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi = Westruckness*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Lexington, KY: Mazdâ Publishers, 1982). For academic studies on Ahmad, see Hamid Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The*

questions of capitalism, communism, and Marxism.[23] One of Mawdudi's most important works was his attempt to articulate "Islamic economics."[24]

The Popularity of Mawdudi's Qur'anic Commentary

Mawdudi's works have had an extraordinary posthumous reach. As SherAli Tareen documents, "Mawdudi's *Tafhim al-Qur'an*, especially in its English online version, is among the most popular contemporary Qur'an translations and commentaries in the world."[25] Mawdudi's intended readers are "the ordinary educated Indian Muslim who thirsts for greater knowledge of the Holy Book," especially those without access to the original Arabic.[26] Mawdudi believed that a movement was necessary for Islam to be revived in the modern age. Central to that movement was a dedication to the teachings of the Qur'an, especially through the interpretation that he offered. Mawdudi characterized the Qur'anic revelation as having incredible force: the words are not just static, dry, lying there, but rather "possessing at once the smooth, natural flow of a river, the violent force of a flood and the overpowering effect of a fierce fire."[27] Mawdudi viewed the emergence of

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Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). See also Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), especially chapter 4, "Islam as a Modernizing Ideology: Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati," 96–127. For a biography of another important postcolonial figure in the Iranian context, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (New York: I. B. Taruris, 2014 [1998]). I owe this reference and recommendation to Najam Haider.

[23] For a study on the Azhari Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abdul Rauf, the father of Faisal Abdul Rauf, who became known in the "Ground Zero Mosque" controversy for his involvement with conservatives from the American Enterprise Institute as well as the US Department of State's sponsoring of a conference at Princeton at which Said Ramadan and notable academics were present, see Rosemary R. Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[24] See Sohaib Khan for developments in this area, especially in Pakistan: "Translating Capital: Islamic Law and the Making of Sharīʿa Compliance in Pakistan" (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2020).

[25] SherAli Tareen, "South Asian Qur'an Commentaries and Translations: A Preliminary Intellectual History," *ReOrient* 5, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 253.

[26] Charles Adam, « Abū'l-A'lā Mawdūdī's *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān, » in Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an,* ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 308.

[27] Mawdudi, "Introducing the Qur'ān," in *Islam: The Way of Revival*, ed. Riza Mohammed and Dilwar Hussain (Markfield, Leicestershire, United Kingdom: Revival Publications, 2003), 73.

Islam in seventh-century Arabia as a dynamic "movement" that challenged and remade the societal atmosphere with an uplifting vision of devotion to God. In Mawdudi's view, "The prophet was the founder of a movement . . . and the revelations had to be adapted to the different requirements of the movement as it passed through successive stages."[28]

Mawdudi recognized how readers' circumstances shape their perceptions. He highlighted how the wording of the Qur'an has references that are particularly relevant for the "immediate environment familiar to the first listeners."[29] Implicit in this was a recognition that modern listeners might be far removed from that original environment; therefore, modern commentators and interpreters of Islam face the task of trying to make the text speak to them more effectively. This motivated Mawdudi to critique the ulama for failing to "relate Islam to modernity, to communicate it effectively and to make intelligible or accessible to modern man the inner reality of the faith."[30] For his supporters, his ability to make Islam relevant to modern realities was what made his work and contributions captivating. Some training or at least reading and understanding modern ideas are necessary for anyone confronting this challenge.

As one of Mawdudi's most notable followers, Khurshid Ahmad (b. 1932), wrote, "He has tried to meet the intellectual challenge of the West and has presented Islam in the language of today."[31] Meeting the challenges of the day, for Mawdudi and his followers, did not mean a

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[28] Adam, « Abū'l-A'lā Mawdūdī's *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* », 311.

[29] Mawdudi, "Introducing the Qur'ān," 72.

[30] Abdul Rashid Moten, "Islamic Thought in Contemporary Pakistan: The Legacy of 'Allāma Mawdudi," in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 177.

[31] Abul A'la Mawdudi, *Islamic Law and Constitution*, trans. and ed. Khurshid Ahmad (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1967), 34–35, cited in Moten, "Islamic Thought in Contemporary Pakistan," 178.

wholesale rejection of everything that came from the West. Actually, Mawdudi wrote that Western principles and features could be "fit[ted] into the educational system and the social life of Muslims" as long as they were in line with "the principles of Islam."[32] Furthermore, Mawdudi cautioned against revolutionary violence and advocated a gradual process of reaching individual minds, transforming their character, informing public opinion, and then finally establishing a social, economic, and political order.[33] State power, as outlined in Mawdudi's writings, must be acquired through constitutional means, notably elections, rather than vigilante acts of violence.[34]

For many modern Muslims, especially in South Asia and the United States, the most influential and accessible work to approach the Qur'an is Mawdudi's commentary, whether in the original Urdu or in translation to Bangla and English. These continue to play an important role in shaping how modern Muslims understand the Qur'an and relate to the larger exegetical tradition. In many ways, Mawdudi's work is attractive for its accessibility. Some of the Muslim readers of Mawdudi whom I spoke to highlighted its organization and clear presentation, with each chapter starting with an explanation of which period of the Prophet's life the contents relate to.

Mawdudi was a seasoned traveler, traveling to over twenty countries, was involved in the founding of Madinah University, had his writings translated into several languages, was read by Sayyid Qutb, and continues to be a profound influence on American Muslims. Consider the CAIR library project, which distributes his *Towards Understanding Islam*, a good introductory text to Islam.[35]

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[32] Mawdudi, *The Sick Nations of the Modern Age* (Lahore: Markazi Maktaba Jamaat-e-Hind, 1964), 11, cited in Moten, "Islamic Thought in Contemporary Pakistan," 189.

[33] Moten, "Islamic Thought in Contemporary Pakistan," 188.

[34] Moten, 188.

[35] CAIR, "Last Chance to Take Part in CAIR's Library Project," https://www.cair.com/action_alerts/last-chance-to-take-part-in-cairs-library-project/.

Mawdudi's influence has been contested after the proliferation of Saudi patronage of Salafi-oriented scholarship and publications, especially following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[36] Salafis/Wahhabis broadly are antagonistic to many aspects of "movement Islam" (*Islām al-ḥarakī*) or "political Islam," which is associated with Sayyid Qutb and Mawdudi. Salafis generally believe that the most important issue to correct is doctrinal matters, narrowly understood through the works of Muhammad b. Abdul Wahhab. Those who do not subscribe to their understandings of tawhid (oneness of God) are often "excommunicated" or deemed non-Muslims through the practice of *takfir*. The Salafi resurgence in the 1990s owed much to Saudi oil money and the rising prominence of Madinah University, which sponsored scholarships for American Muslims to study there and propagate that version of Islam.

We should keep in mind that people often cross boundaries for analytical purposes. Individuals quite commonly have a myriad of influences, even schools of thought whose advocates engage in severe contestation. For example, Simon Fuchs draws attention to how the role of the South Asian Ahl-i Hadis and other ulama have not been adequately recognized for their contribution to the establishment of and teaching at the Islamic University of Medina: "This lack of interest in the South Asian backstory to modern Salafism is surprising."[37] The American Muslim Salafi writer, preacher, and scholar Jamal Zarabozo (b. 1960 in France) has much to praise in Mawdudi's work. These examples illustrate the reach and reception of certain authors, such as Mawdudi and Qutb, across several ideological or sectarian identities and highlight the inadequacy

[36] Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid write, "Since the 1960s, various entities within or connected to the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] have spent tens of billions of dollars to promote an ultraconservative and austere interpretation of Islam around the world" ("Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, November 2018, 9).
[37] Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*, 191.

of relying on simple labels and categorizations and thinking of them as having rigidly defined borders. Zarabozo writes,

> *Towards Understanding the Quran: English Version of Tafhim al-Quran* by Abul Ala Maudoodi is probably the most complete and exhaustive work of tafseer available in the English language. It was written by Abul Ala Maudoodi, a Muslim leader of this century, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islamii in Pakistan, who passed away in 1979. Maudoodi wrote numerous books and a large number of them have been translated into English. The goal of the Tafhim al-Quran was to present the meaning of the Quran to the Urdu speaking populous of Pakistan/India in such a way that its meaning would be very clear to the masses. Two different translations (an earlier one and then a revised one with improved English) are available in English. Although this work has been the target of various criticisms, some warranted and some not so warranted, it remains as the most comprehensive and informative work of tafseer on the entire Quran available in English.

Zarabozo's footnote reads:

> For example, Maududi stresses the importance of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in understanding the Quran, however, his tafseer itself does not have a great reliance on hadith. The most common usage of hadith is when he discusses some of the fiqh rulings. Furthermore sometimes the hadith he uses are not of acceptable quality. In addition, he also only occasionally quotes the explanations of the verses as given by the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Finally, he does have a tendency to reinterpret some of the attributes of Allah in ways that are not consistent, for example, with the understanding of the Companions and their followers.[38]

Reception of Asad's Commentary

Asad's commentary on the Qur'an found a significant readership, especially among Western Muslims. One Turkish American Muslim with a doctoral degree in sociology of religion from a European university who teaches at the Islamic Center at New York University recommended it as the best translation and commentary for "intelligent Muslims." He drew from this work for his classes on the Qur'an, which was fitting for his emphasis on the rationality of the Qur'an and its making sense for modern people. This teacher was very critical of the beliefs and

[38] Jamaal al-Din M. Zarabozo, *How to Approach and Understand the Quran* (Boulder, CO: Al-Basheer Company for Publications and Translations, 1999), 246–247.

practices of contemporary Muslims, especially those who take their faith for granted simply for being born into a Muslim family, without undergoing a process of questioning and "confirmation" of their beliefs from a rational perspective. Another Syrian American Muslim shared how Asad's work is his go-to translation and commentary, recommended for Muslims serious about learning about their scripture and beliefs, not only to ground them in some of the classical exegetical works but also to address modern concerns.

In a thread on reddit.com, a questioner asks, "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?" The existence of this question on that website (an open platform for discussion groups) indicates how some contemporary Muslims seek religious instruction and guidance. Anyone with an account (which is fairly easy to create) can comment, although other members can vote for or against a comment or question to receive more or less attention. One user shares that Yasir Qadhi states:[39]

> His [Asad's] translation of the Qur'an, unfortunately, contains many unorthodox ideas. It is an English translation with a Mu'tazilee perspective. He denies the miracles that the prophets performed (for example, the resurrection of the birds in the story of Ibrahim, (2:260), believes that jinn are not separate creatures, and also has a very liberal approach to Fiqah (for example, the concept Hijab varies with time and place, cf. Surah Noor). Apart from problems of this nature—they are numerous in number—English is one of the best that this author has seen; very lucid and readable. However, it is not to be recommended because of its misinterpretations.

[39] gims2, in response to a post by u/NomaanMalick, "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/which_tafseer_should_i_read_along_with_the_quran/dbx3al1/. In this and subsequent quoted posts, users' original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and syntax are retained.

The same user adds, "Whoever recommends Asad's translation or commentary has never read them or is OK with spreading falsehoods." The thread continues into a brief discussion of "orthodoxy," questioning the authority of Yasir Qadhi, with one user saying Asad's rejection of certain miracles attributed to prophets in the Qur'an is erroneous.

In praise of Asad's work, another user comments, "Read 'Message of the Quran' by Mohammed Asad which is a translation. This is the best translation for understanding the Qur'an correctly."[40] Another user writes,

> Muhammad Assad's is very good. Extremely good, and the one 90% of people would reccomend, and one you should just get anyway. Though some of his commentary is not inline with Islamic thought (his views on Jesus, for example, are controversial in general), but you should read *any* tafsir with a grain of salt.[41]

In his study of seven English translations of the Qur'an, Khalid Blankinship notes that with Asad's extensive knowledge of Arabic as well as his readings in classical exegetical literature, "Asad was able to frame a translation and commentary that has appealed strongly to more educated and upper- or middle-class Muslims, especially those living in English-speaking countries."[42] He notes that Asad's translation and commentary is the "wordiest," having the most extensive word count among the seven works that he examines. Blankinship writes that while Asad's translation and commentary did not reach the same circulation levels as those by other translators such as

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[40] Shawirma, in response to "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/comment/dbx0z2t/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

[41] [Account name deleted], in response to "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/comment/dbwstpa/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

[42] Khalid Blankinship, *The Inimitable Qur'ān: Some Problems in English Translations of the Qur'ān, with Reference to Rhetorical Features* (Boston: Brill, 2019), 24.

Marmaduke Pickthall (1875–1936), Yūsuf Ali, or N. J. Dawood, "it is nevertheless widely used and influential."[43] Furthermore, Asad's translation remains in print and has undergone several reprintings.[44] The late prominent British Muslim convert, Gai Eaton, himself author of several well-regarded books on Islamic teachings presented in an attractive modern format, although critical of much of the modern world (coming from the Perrenialist/Traditionalist school associated with Rene Guenon [1886–1951] and Seyyed Hossein Nasr [b. 1933]), wrote the foreword to the 2003 edition.

In terms of influence, Abdin Chandne laments that Asad's work has not received as "extensive a readership" as the translations of Pickthall and Yūsuf Ali.[45] After being somewhat popular among educated Western Muslims, the authority of Asad's translation and commentary was challenged, especially with the rise of critiques of his work, as mentioned above regarding the Saudi authorities. The market changed with the publication of translations of Islamist commentaries such as Qutb[46] and Mawdudi, Salafi-oriented Tafsir Ibn Kathīr, "traditionalist" commentaries of the *Study Qur'an*, and publications of partial commentary from classical works such as *Qurṭubī* by Aisha Bewley and *Bayḍāwī* by Gibril Haddad. Thus, Asad's uniquely modernist edge has been undermined in the English works of commentary on the Qur'an.

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[43] Blankinship, 24.

[44] Blankinship, 26.

[45] Abdin Chande, "Symbolism and Allegory in the Qur'ān: Muhammad Asad's Modernist Translation," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 1, (2010), 88. For a study of Yūsuf Ali's life, see M. A. Sherif, *Searching for Solace: A Biography of Abdullah Yūsuf Ali, Interpreter of the Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1994).

[46] An interesting point about Asad's influence on Qutb is noted by Martin Kramer. Asad's 1934 work, *Islam at the Crossroads*, critiques materialism, which Asad attributes to "Western civilization" as an early influence on Sayyid Qutb. The Arabic translation was published multiple times in the 1940s and 1950s as *al-Islām 'alā mufṭariq al-ṭuruq*. See Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 235. Kramer also notes how Maryam Jameelah (Margaret Marcus) (1934–2012) also read and cherished Asad's travelogue-memoir, *The Road to Mecca*, borrowing and reading it numerous times at the public library in Mamaroneck, NY (239). Jameelah relocated to Pakistan and shared some of Asad's initial hopes for creating a modern Islamic state.

However, the rationalist or *'aqlī* classical tafsīr sources of Asad are slowly becoming more familiar in the Anglophone world.

Muhammad Asad's son, Talal Asad, writes that his father was concerned "with immersing himself critically in the tradition of Islam that became *his* tradition, and with encouraging members of *his* community (Muslims) to adopt an approach that he considered to be its essence."[47] Central to his father's vision of Islam was "his conviction that access to Islam is based on reason, and that therefore *argument* is necessary to becoming and being a Muslim."[48] Given that Asad lived in multiple countries after he started his project, it is misleading to say that he only produced the commentary "based on a lifetime of study and many years of living in Saudi Arabia," as Abdin Chande does in his otherwise useful article, as if only that time in Arabia (six years in the 1930s) contributed to Asad's study of the Qur'an. Chande perhaps follows Asad's appeal in his introduction to his time in Arabia as formative and indicative of his deep knowledge of "classical" and "pure" Arabic, which he was able to "extract" from his interactions and conversations with the Bedouin Arabs in the 1920s. However, there is reason to probe deeper. Surely, in addition to the time Asad spent in Arabia, his time in Pakistan (some twenty years), Morocco, New York, Geneva, and Spain; his discussion with other Muslim scholars; and his wide reading of classical and modern commentaries such as *Tafsīr al-Manār* by Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida contributed a great wealth of knowledge and resources. Perhaps Asad's strategy was to argue that he was drawing from his deep familiarity with the nuances of classical Arabic rather than from his own project of modern rationalism which was viewed suspiciously by some Muslims. However, one of the senior Muslim scholars I spoke to in Chicago questioned Asad's understanding of the

[47] Talal Asad, "Muhammad Asad between Religion and Politics," *Insan ve Toplum* 1, no. 2, (2011):156.

[48] Asad, 156.

classical Arabic texts that he cites. Further investigation would be required to find specific examples of Asad's misreading of those works.

While Mawdudi's commentary was originally written in Urdu and then translated into multiple languages, including English, and Ibn Kathīr's medieval work was written in Arabic and then abridged and translated into English, Asad's commentary is unique in being originally composed in English. Even though he draws from classical works, especially of the kalām tradition, as emphasized at the outset of this chapter, he is not shy about offering original reflections and commentary. Furzana Bayri, in her study of Asad's translation and commentary, says, "Asad was markedly influenced by al-Zamaksharī's 'rational trend', al-Rāzi's 'philosophical digressions' and Muhammad 'Abduh's 'social interpretations,' but he also frequently wove in his own informed opinions, as is witnessed by the frequent usage of the phrase 'to my mind.'"[49] As a Muslim from a European Jewish background, Bayri sees Asad's work as contributing to the effort of "post-colonial discourse," where "the colonized have appropriated the coloniser's language and are writing back, transforming the English language lexicon in the process."[50] Bayri pairs Asad's work with that of Pickthall, for both were Western converts to Islam.[51]

Interestingly, even though Asad wrote about governance and Islam and politics, these do not receive attention in the commentary on the two chapters from the Qur'an that I focus on. This stands in contrast to Mawdudi and Qutb. As we have seen for Mawdudi, these narratives have many implications for how to view society and take a position of power to influence it in an

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[49] Furzana Bayri, "*Li-qawmin yatafakkarūn* (Q. 30.21): Muhammad Asad's Qur'anic Translatorial *Habitus*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 21, no. 2 (2019): 23.

[50] Bayri, 2.

[51] Bayri, 7. For a study on Pickthall's life and works, see Peter Clark, *Marmaduke Pickthall: British Muslim* (London: Quartet Books, 1986).

"Islamic direction." Even though he was imprisoned, as were Mawdudi and Qutb, Asad does not have much to say about oppressive prison conditions. In general, Asad is more reliant on the classical commentaries, for which the oppressiveness and supposed immorality of Egyptian society are not the main concern. This is opposed to those Islamist readers who believe that committed Muslims are to battle the *jahiliyya* (ignorance) of European colonialism and Western cultural mores. In a letter in 1961, Mawdudi voiced a personal critique of Asad's lifestyle and marriage (his third) to the Polish Catholic convert to Islam, Pola Hamida, whom Mawdudi called "a modern American girl." Mawdudi wrote that although Asad was initially "a staunch, practicing Muslim, gradually he drifted close to the ways of the so-called 'progressive' Muslim just like the 'reformed' Jews." Nevertheless, Mawdudi appreciated Asad's "exposition of Islamic ideas and especially his criticism of Western culture and its materialistic philosophies."[52]

Salafi and traditionalist commentaries can be seen as being less preoccupied with arguing for the rationality of Islam or at least having a different set of emphases. Salafi readings are attractive for their supposed simplicity and directness, distilling the tradition's multiple voices and disagreements down to a few authoritative readings—classical ones such as Ibn Taymiyya, his students Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Kathīr, and contemporary scholars such as al-Albani, Ibn Baz, and Ibn Uthaymīn. Salafi readings target what they see as "deviant" readings, particularly those associated with Sufism and saint and grave/tomb veneration. They also view the kalām legacy of the Mu'tazilī, Ash'arī, and Maturidī debates as blameworthy innovations and in general favor more literal interpretations that assert the outward (*ḍhāhir*) reading of texts as opposed to metaphorical interpretations, particularly in relation to attributes of God (*ṣifāt).* Traditionalist commentaries, on

[52] Kramer, "The Road from Mecca," 240, citing "Maududi (Lahore) to Margaret Marcus, 25 February 1961," in Maryam Jameelah, *Correspondence between Maulana Maudoodi and Maryam Jameelah* (Delhi: Crescent Publishing, 1969), 15.

the other hand, are quite comfortable with the plethora of classical interpretations and their embeddedness in the kalām discourse of metaphorical readings and language implications. Generally, traditionalists look down on modernist readings such as that by ‘Abduh and his student Rashid Rida, which Asad favorably draws from and finds inspiration in. Salafis have a complicated relationship with modernists such as ‘Abduh and Rida.[53]

Asad argues that Muslims need to exercise *ijtihad* and rationality. This again highlights the inadequate nature of labels, whether traditionalist or modernist, for capturing the nuanced approach of these thinkers to the Islamic tradition in modernity. They are neither arguing for everything to be jettisoned and Muslims starting from scratch, nor are they simply arguing that imitating the past is sufficient to address contemporary challenges. In an earlier chapter, we saw how some of Asad’s concerns overlap with those of Sufis. Asad sought to present teachings and texts from this tradition to the greater Muslim community and tried to get more Muslims to appreciate these resources as departure points for addressing modern philosophical issues or existential questions that human beings in search of meaning and profundity may be engaged with at a deep level. This approach, as we have seen, prizes the intellect but also recognizes the limitations of the intellect and the value of the spirit or soul and the falsity of outward appearances, as Asad argues in the Musa-Khidr narrative in the Cave chapter. Perhaps many Muslims found that this complete turn to allegory and metaphor went too far in interpreting the Qur’an and trying to make it fit for the modern “scientific” mind. An alternative view is a Salafi “authentic” hadith-based approach to tafsīr, embodied in the Darussalam abridged translation of Ibn Kathīr. There, metaphor and allegory are not embraced; rather, literal historical readings are employed. Asad

[53] Rida became more hadith oriented than his teacher ‘Abduh. See Emad Shahin, “Salafīyah,” in The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Studies Online. 05-Feb-2022. <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0700>.

embraced mystical readings, and his emphasis on rationality recognized the limits of reason and the idea that divine workings may be beyond the reach of reason, as exemplified in the story of Moses's encounter with the "unnamed sage" in the chapter of the Cave.

The *kalām* tradition and the approach of ʿAbduh and Asad are severely contested, especially by modern-day Salafis who dominated and replaced Asad in the world of influential Qur'anic commentaries in the North American Muslim community, especially after the 1990s. Asad's work appeared after the widespread reception of Islamist/Activist commentaries such as Mawdudi and Qutb, which were popular among American Muslims in the 1960s and 1970s. As educated Muslim immigrants established themselves and sought to explain their faith to their Jewish and Christian neighbors by drawing from the intellectual heritage of Islam, Asad's scholarly appropriation and study of classical and modern tafsīr proved to be a logical and useful resource. Thus, Asad continues to have an appeal and attraction for "rational" Muslims. This is not surprising given the pressures on all religious believers today, particularly from atheists, to prove that their beliefs can stand inquiry on the plane of "rationality."[54]

Reception of Mubārakpūrī's Abridgment of Ibn Kathīr

On the Reddit thread cited earlier, one user responds, "Definitely tafsir Ibn Kathīr and only that tafseer. This is because this is the most basic one and it gives a better understanding over the Quran whereas other tafaseer will go into other aspects, which can be quite confusing for the lay muslim."[55] The user identifies Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr as the exclusive authoritative commentary because

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[54] For interrogations of universal notions of "reason" in Muslim contexts, see Wael Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican,* 8–13, in which he draws on Professor Hallaq's aforementioned study. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[55] Studentofilm, in response to "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/comment/dbwz7v7/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

it focuses on the Qur'anic verses in question, while other commentaries supposedly delve into extra matters that the "lay Muslim" may find confusing. Another user specifically recommends the Mubārakpūrī abridgment, citing him by name; I have not commonly seen readers highlight the committee who abridged the work. This user writes,"I would have to advise *al-Miṣbāḥ al-Munīr* which is an abridgement of *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr* by a committee of Scholars headed by ash-Shaykh Safī ar-Raḥmān al-Mubārakfūrī. It is 10 volumes long, but the English is very good and each verse is explained in a way that even laymen can understand."[56]

Again, there is recognition of different levels of expertise and scholarship and the assumption that a "lay" person seeking help would appreciate the simplicity and clarity of this abridgment's translation. Another user provides a link to a Salafi website with audio recordings of a Muslim convert discussing tafsīr based on Ibn Kathīr.[57] Volume 1 of this series has ninety-eight recordings and runs up to the 177th verse of the second (and longest) chapter of the Qur'an. Volume 2 has fifty-nine recordings, and volume 3 has 147, for a total of 304 recordings posted on the website.[58]

Another work that is very much informed by the Salafī movement, and thus close to the concerns of the modern publishers of Ibn Kathīr, is Muhsin Khan and al-Hilali's nine-volume

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[56] [Account name deleted], in response to "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/comment/dby7811/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

[57] Abu Hakeem Bilal Davis, "Tafsir ibn Kathīr by Abu Hakeem Bilal Davis," Salafi Sounds, December 31, 2014, https://www.salafisounds.com/tafsir-ibn-Kathīr-by-abu-hakeem-bilal-davis/, posted by TheRealDardan in response to "Which Tafseer should I read along with the Qur'an?," https://www.reddit.com/r/islam/comments/5lll4r/comment/dbwq2hf/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

[58] Abu Hakeem Bilal Davis, "Tafsir ibn Kathīr by Abu Hakeem," vol. 2 (parts 99+), Salafi Sounds, June 22, 2015, https://www.salafisounds.com/tafsir-ibn-Kathīr-by-abu-hakeem-vol-2-parts-99/; Abu Hakeem Bilal Davis, "Tafsir ibn Kathīr by Abu Hakeem," vol. 3 (parts 158+), Salafi Sounds, July 21, 2016, https://www.salafisounds.com/tafsir-ibn-Kathīr-by-abu-hakeem-vol-3-parts-158/.

Qur'anic exegesis, which claims to summarize from the classical exegesis of Qurtubi, Tabari, Ibn Kathīr, and others. A prominent exponent of the Salafī trend was the Moroccan Taqi al-Din al-Hilali (1894–1987).[59] In 1968, the Salafi Saudi scholar Ibn Baz (1910–1999) invited him to teach at the newly established Islamic University of Medina, and he taught there until 1974.[60] In 1977, he joined forces with Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan, a Pakistani cardiologist who trained in the United Kingdom and directed the clinic associated with the Islamic University of Medina, to produce an English translation of and commentary on the Qur'an as a project sponsored by the Saudi religious establishment.[61] In addition to the nine-volume commentary, there is a summarized one-volume (eight hundred pages) version. The two men would later translate the hadith collection of Bukhari. Both works, as Henri Lauziere notes, offer "a Salafi interpretive framework and present readers with a simplified, unyielding exposé of orthodoxy and orthopraxy."[62] Hilali and Khan's contribution of a hadith-based Salafi commentary on the Qur'an in English influenced

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[59] Henri Lauziere notes that al-Hilali thought it essential for his religious authority and scholarship to pursue graduate studies from a Western university. He enrolled at the University of Bonn in 1936 in Nazi Germany but switched to the University of Berlin, where he submitted his dissertation on the medieval scholar al-Biruni (d. 1048). See Henri Lauziere, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 135–140. al-Hilali taught at the University of Baghdad for ten years (173) during the 1950s, after which he returned to his native country of Morocco, which gained independence in 1957. al-Hilali's difference from Islamists/activists like Mawdudi and Qutb is notable: "He did not believe that it was the role of the 'ulama to participate in the governing process" (177). He taught at the newly formed Muhammad V University in Rabat in 1959 but by 1970 expressed his disappointment in the institution and its Sufi students and faculty, who did not share his Salafi commitments. When a new institute dedicated to the study of hadith was formed in 1964, al-Hilali expressed great enthusiasm at the chance to train Muslim missionaries with English or French language skills who would be instrumental in disseminating the Salafi perspective but he became disillusioned with the project after two-and-a-half months (184–185).

[60] Lauziere, 192, 202.

[61] Lauziere, 202. It is entitled Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language: A Summarized Version of al-Tabari, al-Qurtubi, and Ibn Kathīr, with Comments from Sahih al-Bukhari. Originally published in 1993, the Fahd Complex would print and distribute it free of charge during pilgrimage in Saudi and through Islamic centers and the Saudi embassy.

[62] Lauziere, 204.

massive distribution free of charge through Saudi patronage.[63] As Lauziere notes, “al-Hilali and Khan have become household names among Muslims in the West, especially in America and Britain.”[64]

Another contemporary manifestation of the popularization of the hadith-based approach to tafsīr is in the comments of the popular Indian Muslim televangelist, Dr. Zakir Naik (b. 1965).[65] Naik is a mentee of Ahmed Deedat, the South African Muslim polemicist known for his debates against Christian missionaries.[66] On a Muslim TV program called *Peace TV* (available on Naik’s YouTube channel[67]), he was asked, “Which is the best Arabic tafsir that has been translated into English?” In this formulation of the question, Arabic works of tafsīr are seen as particularly authoritative even though, of course, tafsīr works have been written in Urdu, Bengali, and other Islamicate languages. Reliance on English translations again shows that language’s prevalence as one in which Muslims today are learning about their religion, whether in India or in the West or in English-speaking parts of Muslim-majority countries, in contrast to earlier, for example, Deobandi, resistance to English as the language of the British colonizers.[68]

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[63] Bruce Lawrence, *The Koran in English: A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 83.

[64] Lauziere, The Making of Salafism, 202.

[65] For studies on Naik, see Matthew J. Kuiper, *Da‘wa and Other Religions: Indian Muslims and the Modern Resurgence of Global Islamic Activism* (London: Routledge, 2017); Vika Gardner, E. Carolina Mayes, and Salman Hameed, “Preaching Science and Islam: Dr. Zakir Naik and Discourses of Science and Islam in Internet Videos,” *Die Welt des Islams* 58, no. 3 (August 2018): 357–391; Maziah Mustapha and Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak, “A Critical Appraisal of Zakir Naik’s Islamic Evangelism,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 15 (2019): 71–83; “Controversial Indian Preacher to Remain in Malaysia,” *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, July 11, 2018, accessed on ProQuest, December16, 2020.

[66] For background on Deedat, see Samadia Sadouni, “Ahmed Deedat, Internationalisation, and the Transformation of Islamic Polemic,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 43, no. 1 (2013): 53–73; Bruce Larkin, “Ahmed Deedat and the Form of Islamic Evangelism,” *Social Text 96* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 101–121.

[67] Zakir Naik, *The Best Available Tafseer of the Quran in English*, YouTube, July 10, 2015, https://youtu.be/G7M_GS9bbng.

[68] See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

Naik mentions two Arabic classical or medieval tafsīrs, Tabari's (839–923)[69] and Ibn Kathīr's (1300–1373). Naik quotes Ibn Khuzayma (837–923) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) as praising Tabari's work for being especially valuable to scholars: "giving the views of the salaf" and quoting hadiths with "authentic sanad" (chains of transmission of hadith), avoiding *bida'* (innovation), and including the full chains of transmissions or *isnads* for the hadith reports that he collects. Naik notes that these full chains "may not be of interest for the common man" who just wants to know the grade of the hadith, whether authentic or not. Naik states that Ibn Kathīr was praised by Suyūṭī (1445–1505), who also followed the hadith-based approach.[70] Naik notes that Ibn Kathīr is especially useful for cross-referencing other Qur'anic verses and hadith, including from the Musnad of Ahmad, which Ibn Kathīr had memorized. Naik recommends Ibn Kathīr as good for the scholar, seeker, and ordinary Muslim; he notes that, of the two he mentions, only this tafsīr has been translated into English and specifically mentions it as having been translated and published by Darussalam in Riyadh, which perhaps carries some authority or weight for the audience Naik is targeting, with its religious significance or the connotation of holiness attached to Saudi Arabia.

In another very short video (fifty-nine seconds), a young Muslim who goes by "Dawah Man" has over eighty-two thousand views of him opening a box of books that he is very excited to have recently acquired. In the box is the voluminous tafsīr of Ṭabarī, whom the young man calls "the imam of the mufassirīn (Qu'ranic exegetes)." He says the religious scholars (ulema) see the work as "the best tafsīr out there, no questions asked. This tafsīr has no dodgy thing, pure sunnah.

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[69] For a study on Ṭabarī's approach to Qur'anic exegesis, see Mustafa Shah, "Al-Ṭabarī and the Dynamics of Tafsīr: Theological Dimensions of a Legacy," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15, no. 2 (2013): 83–139.

[70] On Suyuti, see Shabir Ally, "The Culmination of Tradition-Based Tafsīr: The Qur'ān Exegesis, al-Durr al-manthūr" of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505)" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2012); Faiyazul Haqq, "Jalaluddin Suyuti: His Life & Works" (PhD dissertation, Gauhati University, India, 1993).

Nowadays, we all talk about tafsīr al-Qur'an, and people are bringing out their own interpretation. In this book, you will find the interpretation of the Sahabah [Companions], the Prophet, of the salaf al-salihīn [pious predecessors]." The work is in Arabic, and the young man wishes that his audience would study Arabic and acquire the book.[71] Viewers can see how much he prizes the authority of the Arabic language and being fluent enough to access a classical text. He mentions contemporary Muslims interpreting the Qur'an on their own, which he frowns on, valuing instead the interpretations of the early generations. However, he does not discuss the training and tools that contemporary readers need to be able to sort through the chains of transmission (*sanads*) and access and translate their meanings and interpretations. Nevertheless, he emphasizes the sunna or Prophetic reports as the best way to interpret the Qur'an.

The emphasis on hadith narrations as the best mode or approach for understanding the Qur'an, the particular emphasis on sorting through the hadith for what is deemed to be the most authentic or authoritative, and the concern for avoiding *bida'* or innovations—all of these features are emphasized by the modern Salafi movement, including the distinctly modern phenomenon of pronounced esteem for Ibn Taymiyya.[72] As Johanna Pink writes, "Salafis are scripturalists who consider the Qur'an and the Sunna the only authoritative sources of religion. . . . Salafis, in principle, deny the authority of later scholars although there are, in fact, some scholars whom they tend to grant a high degree of authority for having applied a Salafi methodology."[73] Some of these

[71] Naseeha Sessions, "The BEST tafseer in the universe!!!," YouTube, March 14, 2017, https://youtu.be/4d7AHz1oGIQ.
[72] For a study on the relationship between hadith and tafsīr in premodern or classical/early Islam, see Roberto Tottoli, "Interrelations and Boundaries between Tafsir and Hadith Literature: The Exegesis of Malik b. Anas' Muwatta and Classical Qur'anic Commentaries," in *Tafsir and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 147-186.

[73] Johanna Pink, Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities (Bristol, England: Equinox Publishing, 2019), 12.

features overlap with other movements—for example, the Deobandi movement—in their special concern for hadith authenticity and hadith commentary. In this approach, alternative approaches to Islam and the Qur'an become marginalized.

Another assessment of Ibn Kathīr comes from the contemporary influential Deobandi Pakistani scholar Mufti Taqī Uthmānī (also spelled Usmani) (b. 1943). Beginning his overview of tafsīr works with *Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*, Usmani notes how Ibn Kathīr, because of his mastery of the sciences of grading hadith, "has done away with those weak and Maw-dū [fabricated] narrations which were being transmitted by earlier commentators and he has warned about relying on weak narrations."[74] Usmani, who also teaches hadith, including the works of Sahih al-Bukhari at the Darul 'Ulūm madrasa in Karachi, recommends Ibn Kathīr for its attention to authoritative, or the most rigid, hadith authentication standards. However, Usmani cautions that "this does not mean that every narration quoted in this exegesis is correct," and he provides an example where Ibn Kathīr quotes what Usmani considers to be "weak reports," although Ibn Kathīr did not indicate its weakness.[75] Usmani's emphasis on hadith sciences and hadith authentication can be contextualized within the special and elevated status that hadith studies and authentication have commanded, especially in the Deobandi tradition, as Metcalf and Zaman document. Salafis and Deobandis and certain reform-minded contemporary Muslims share this emphasis on sifting through the hadith collections for what they consider to be most authentic.[76] This indicates the extent to which the transmitted disciplines or sciences of Islamic knowledge (the *manqūlāt*) have

[74] Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, *Uloomul Quran: An Approach to the Quranic Sciences*, trans. Dr. Mohammed Swaleh Siddiqui, ed. Rafiq Abdur Rahman (Karachi, Pakistan: Darul-Ishaat, 2007), 514.
[75] Usmani, 515.

[76] Of course, hadith scholars past and present differ in their grading of hadith and hadith narrators. The contemporary Salafi-oriented Albanian scholar Al-Albani has played an enormous role in questioning the authenticity of even canonical hadith collections. See Emad Hamdeh, *Salafism and Traditionalism: Scholarly Authority in Modern Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

dominated and marginalized alternative approaches of the rational sciences/disciplines (the *ma'qūlāt*), as Metcalf, Bano, and others have documented. Hamza Yūsuf makes this point in his general advocacy for the value of the kalām and philosophical and logical traditions of medieval Islamic intellectual history.[77]

Usmani further notes that Ibn Kathīr marks the sections in his tafsīr where he provides narrations from the biblical literature, known as Isrā'īliyyāt[78]: "Ibn Kathīr is extremely cautious in treating these citations and his approach is clean and based on the Qur'ān and Traditions."[79] Usmani gives an example in which Ibn Kathīr provides a biblical narration but follows it by casting doubt on its veracity, noting that many of the narrations can be traced to Ka'b al-Aḥbār, the Jewish convert to Islam in the Prophet Muhammad's time.[80] Ibn Kathīr says, "In these reports all sorts of things, good and bad, were collected and this Ummah does not need a single word of all those things."[81] Despite Ibn Kathīr's cautious incorporation or mention of the Isrā'īliyāt, part of how the Darussalam abridgment markets itself is by saying that its version is free from all weak narrations, including the Isrā'īliyāt, which the modern Salafi approach categorically rejects.

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[77] For a study that Bano heavily relies on in her own telling of contemporary Islam and the development of Islamic intellectual history, see John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); this book was recommended by Shaykh Hamza Yūsuf, and Bano cites it in her work. See Masooda Bano, *The Revival of Islamic Rationalism: Logic, Metaphysics and Mysticism in Modern Muslim Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 55. Ibn Taymiyya and Suyūṭī opposed kalām, seeing them as Greek-infused traditions that crept into and thus should be excised from Islamic learning and arguing for a "pure" approach to the Qur'anic revelation and traditions of the Prophet and early generations. See Wael Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[78] For a study of the term "Isrā'īliyyaat," see Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term Isrāʾīliyyāt in Muslim Literature," *Arabica* 46, no. 2 (1999): 193–210.

[79] Usmani, *Uloomul Quran*, 515.

[80] For a study of reports from Ka'b al-Aḥbār, see Abd Alfatah Ka'b Twakkal, "Ka'b Al-Ahbār and the Isrā'īliyāt in the Tafsīr literature" (master's thesis, McGill University, 2007).

[81] Usmani, *Uloomul Quran*, 515, citing Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr,* 4:17.

In a video of almost four minutes with twelve thousand views, Dr. Shabir Ally, who completed his dissertation on tafsīr at the University of Toronto, is asked, "Which is the best commentary on the Qur'an?" For readers interested in a classical or traditional work, he notes several, some available in English translation, including that of Ibn Kathīr. For readers looking for a contemporary work, he recommends *Ma'ariful Qur'an*. However, for readers "of a rationalist bent," he recommends Muhammad Asad, who he says draws from traditional works but also presents the Qur'an in a rational manner. When asked what tafsīr he personally uses, he mentions the work of Qurtubi and Razi, only the first volumes of which have been translated into English.[82]

How does a fourteenth-century exegesis of the Qur'an get selected for widespread dissemination among Muslims today, and what aspects of that exegesis are highlighted as authoritative in shaping contemporary Muslims' beliefs and practices? What aspects get neglected or marginalized or expunged? In terms of religious texts, the process of abridgment is instrumental in promoting certain interpretative positions: abridgment makes the retained positions seem more authoritative, more mainstream. As Jan Assmann argues, in comparing which texts have and have not been canonized, we can ask about the motivations behind such choices instead of taking for granted that certain texts have always been recognized as superior. Thus we "uncover the forces that motivate the development, growth, coming together and sanctification of the texts."[83] As John Wansbrough, one of the major "revisionist" Qur'anic scholars, reminds us, it is "useful to remember that no writer merely transmits and that even a compilation reveals principles both of

[82] Shabir Ally, "Which Commentary of the Quran Is Best?" *Let the Qur'an Speak*, YouTube, March 10, 2021, https://youtu.be/_DmJnFFzSU8.

[83] Jan Assman, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 65.

selection and of arrangement."[84] To place the widespread favorable reception of Ibn Kathīr into context, we have to briefly delve into the history of the Salafi movement.

The term "Salafi" has lately been the subject of several detailed studies. It is important to be mindful of the changes in its usage as it is invoked by a wide cast of actors who diverge considerably in their positions. One usage traces its leading position to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), and Rashid Rida (d. 1935). Ingrid Mattson cites John Voll in recognizing some tendencies toward a "reformist-revivalist tradition" even before contact with European colonialism.[85] Voll uses "fundamentalist" to characterize this approach, and Mattson explains this as a "tendency to reject many aspects of the Islamic tradition that had developed over the centuries. . . . For these reformers, Muslim societies were weak because . . . they had taken a deviant path; thus, the solution was to return to the pure Islam of the Prophet's time." This Salafī approach emphasized eliminating what it saw as weak and even fabricated traditions, meaning those not fulfilling the highest standards of scrutiny for hadith reports. The ascendancy of the Salafi approach narrowed what was deemed acceptable; the material that was acceptable became popular through, in addition to Saudi patronage, increased production of publications for mass distribution and mass literacy, which lent itself to "do-it-yourself" Islam—self-read approaches—as opposed to those mediated solely through a specialized, learned class (ulama). Salafis generally strongly contest the adherence to a madhhab or legal school and the classical legacy and are critical of the classical exegetical traditions of the ulama—in particular, those relating to the kalām and Sufi traditions.

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[84] John Wansbrough, Qur'ānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 120.
[85] Ingrid Mattson, The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008), 211.

Salafism, as Lauziere meticulously demonstrates, rather than being taken as "a historical given," needs to be understood in relation to "the historical process by which various intellectuals came to shape and defend it."[86] The influence of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in publishing and promoting the Salafi approach must be noted for shaping contemporary Islamic discourse in an unprecedented manner, especially through global outreach, scholarships, and publications made possible by its oil wealth, especially in the 1970s after the oil embargo. As historian Zachary Lockman notes, "this shift was signaled by the rise of Saudi Arabia as a political and cultural power across the region (and the wider Muslim world), thanks largely to the enormous oil wealth it could use (with U.S. approval) to buy friends and influence as well as to export its own rather harsh and puritanical but socially and politically conservative—and pro-Western—version of Islam."[87] Saudi's rise in influence as a shaper of global Muslim thought took place in the contexts of the contestation over Egyptian socialist Nasser and the Cold War. The United States supported the Saudis in countering Nasser's Arab nationalism and pro-Soviet appeal, and perception of Saudi religious legitimacy undoubtedly played a major role in shaping the hearts and minds of Muslims around the globe as they experimented with various ideologies and questions of how to structure society, culture, and economics in the wake of independence movements.[88]

[86] Henri Lauziere, *The Making of Salafism*, 3.
[87] Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 162.

[88] For a study of Cold War contestation over Islam and the value attached to or read into a type of Sufism, see Rosemary R. Hicks, "Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation of Indo-Persian Mysticism into Liberal Islamic Modernity," in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141–168. For a study of the role of US foundations in promoting pacifist Sufis in the Cold War context, see Rosemary R. Corbett, "Anti-Colonial Militants or Liberal Peace Activists? The Role of Private Foundations in Producing Pacifist Sufis During the Cold War," in *Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Katherine Pratt Ewing and Rosemary R. Corbett (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 27–39.

I spoke to several Muslim scholars with madrasa training who have a finger on the pulse of significant portions of the contemporary Muslim community, and they shared that tafsīr and the Qur'an in general seem to be neglected by many Muslims today. One scholar in Chicago faulted the Salafi movement for dumbing down Qur'anic interpretation and giving the impression that it is accessible although, in fact, it offers very limited perspectives. Another scholar said, "It is as if Muslims are scared of the Qur'an." Another, who studied in Egypt and Syria for several years, reflected that study of the Qur'an is not prioritized in the curriculums of the institutions he studied in. Another scholar shared how, in his estimation, most Muslims in the U.S. context engage with some level of tafsīr only through what they hear in Friday sermons and general talks in mosques and Islamic centers. He cited as a worthy work *Ma'ariful Qur'an* by the Deobandi scholar Muhammad Shafi (1897–1976), which was written for lay Muslims in Urdu and translated into English, but he noted that it is not circulated widely. He cites the translation and publication of Ibn Kathīr's tafsīr as laudable, saying that if American Muslims do engage with any tafsīr, it is probably that work or snippets from Hilali and Khan's translation and commentary on the Qur'an, which draws from Qurtubi, Tabarī, and Ibn Kathīr.

This latter scholar confirmed my observation that in circles affiliated with Muslim organizations such as MAS, which is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the commentary of Sayyid Qutb is popular. Likewise, in circles of ICNA, affiliated with the Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan, Mawdudi's works are recommended, read, and discussed. He shared concerns about how even those Muslims who engage in a systematic study of the religion for four to seven years in the *dars-i nizami*[89] curriculum in madrasa settings often only engage with tafsīr at a rudimentary level, reading texts like *Jalalayn* by Suyūṭī and Maḥalī, which briefly comments on

[89] For more about this curriculum, popular in Deobandi-oriented madrasas in South Asia and now in the West, see Ebrahim Moosa, *What Is a Madrasa?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

the linguistic meanings of certain words. According to him, in these settings, students often hear longer, encyclopedic works like Ālūsī's *Rūḥ al-Mā'nī* or Ṭabarī's tafsīr, but they almost never get around to actually reading these works. The focus, he shared, seems to be on Hanafi fiqh, addressing fatwas for contemporary issues and hadith.

I spoke with a senior Pakistani American Muslim scholar who studied in madrasas in India and founded an institution for higher Islamic learning in a suburb of Chicago. He shared with me his view that Mawdudi's work is plagued with subservience to his political project, drawing, often without citation, verbatim from Amin Ahsan Islahi's (1904–1997) famous Urdu tafsīr. Mawdudi, according to this scholar, was not very well versed or studied in the Islamic disciplines, especially hadith. This scholar also expressed his view that Asad was so shaped by his Western background and concerns that he was not informed by the teachings of the Qur'an and Islam but rather by the Western European philosophical concerns of his time. He also questioned the proficiency of Asad's Arabic skills. Ibn Kathīr, he said, offers the safety of prophetic interpretations based on hadiths, but it is a narrow perspective on tafsīr. He noted that the Salafi movement and petrodollars led to its proliferation in the contemporary period. Other works are much more expansive and draw from the kalām tradition as well as Sufi traditions.

Conclusion

The contestation over the nuances and approaches to tafsīr in contemporary Islam is captured in a joke that the American Muslim scholar Hamza Yūsuf makes about how there are too many "*naql*-heads" (a play on "knuckle-heads") today—that is, those who exclusively favor the transmitted sciences to the neglect or marginalization of the *'aqlī* or rational sciences. The development of the rational disciplines of logic, speculative theology (kalām), and philosophy gave rise to the philosophically oriented or kalām-based tafsīrs of Zamakhsharī, Razi, and Bayḍāwī. The *naqlī* approach of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Kathīr, and Suyūtī took the hadith-based collections of Ṭabarī and Abū Ḥatim al-Rāzī and prioritized transmitted reports as the most authoritative way to engage in Qur'anic exegesis. This approach, while present in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, was not the dominant approach. The twentieth century saw a reversal in the prevalence of the *naqlī*-transmitted / hadith-based approach, so much so that with Saudi funding and the growth and spread of the Salafi movement, Ibn Kathīr's hadith-based work become widely distributed and accessible to contemporary Muslims.

The field of Qur'anic commentaries underwent many changes in the twentieth century. The encyclopedic works, which offered polyvalent readings of the Qur'an, became marginalized while a postcolonial Islamist or activist reading became widespread (chiefly concerned with the project of constructing a new Islamic society). The general Muslim population was not exposed to the sophistication of premodern works of tafsīr, which require scholarly training to access and appreciate. As Shahab Ahmed puts it,

> This modern downsizing of the terms of the hermeneutical engagement of Islam has rendered (the majority of) modern Muslims in a cognitive and epistemic condition where they are largely unable to establish a coherent conceptual relationship between modern

Islam and premodern Islam: it has, in other words, rendered modern Muslims largely unable to conceptualize human and historical Islam.[1]

Muhammad Asad, despite the controversy around some of his positions, was one contemporary translator and commentator who did draw from the premodern classical tafsīrs, such as Rāzī, Bayḍāwī, and Zamakhsharī. Ibn Kathīr represents a hadith-based approach and a work that was not popular before the twentieth century; however, it only represents a slice of the premodern tafsīr tradition. Some newer works and translations that draw from those traditions promise to enrich contemporary Muslims' appreciation of tafsīr while providing ground for new insights and interpretations. Recovery of polyvalent traditions of interpretation and expansion of access to the commentary traditions, including kalām and Sufism, hopefully will continue to be the next stage of widespread publications in contemporary Islam.

In conclusion, the Qur'an continues to be read and interpreted in ways that contemporary Muslims find to be relevant to their present context. Attention therefore needs to be given to how Muslims are re-reading works of Qur'anic exegesis and even producing their own works and reflections, rather than freezing Muslims and their scripture in an uncharitable manner. Muslims are increasingly able to access more literature from Islamic traditions. But they are also active participants in reading scripture, which is an important site for observers and scholars to examine as they shape new trends and orientations of Islamic thought today.

[1] Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 516.

Afterword

Differing understandings of correct practice and beliefs play out in contemporary Islam, including at an Ivy League university such as Columbia University in New York. I started serving as Muslim Life Coordinator and Religious Life Adviser there in July 2021. My responsibilities include overseeing the communal Friday and Muslim holiday services, holding office hours for counseling and conversations, and leading a weekly study circle (halaqa). In the fall of 2021, I led a study circle on Sura Yūsuf and during the spring of 2022, the study circle was on Sura Kahf.

With students from all over the world and country, I try to help accommodate and navigate through different understandings of Islam which are present to various degrees within the student body on campus. This goal of trying to bring together the Muslim student body on campus shapes what I stress in my interpretations of the Qur'an, whether in the study circle or in my Friday sermons and conversations with students. This requires a specific approach to interpretation. For example, in covering the mention of the dog in Sura Kahf, rather than getting into legal opinions regarding the permissibility of keeping a dog, which can perhaps be a divisive issue, I emphasized the teaching of the benefits of good companionship, of which the dog of the Companions of the Cave exemplifies.

For my halaqas or study circles on Sura Yūsuf, I prepared handouts with material, especially drawing from the *Study Quran*, Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an*, and Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr*. I would also prepare by skimming through Razī and Alusi's Arabic tafsirs and Yasir Qadhi's book on Sura Yūsuf. One student asked which tafsirs I was drawing from and I mentioned that the *Study Quran* and Asad drew on several classical tafsirs. She was particularly familiar with Ibn Kathīr and was pleased that I was using that as a source. In my teaching of Sura Yūsuf to this group of Ivy League university students, I find the students are less familiar with

Muhammad Asad. On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr is well-known; it was the first and one of the only tafsīrs they cited. Furthermore, some students were also not hesitant to push back against some of Asad's readings that incline toward metaphorical interpretations as opposed to literal ones, which is a consistent feature in Asad's work.

In the beginning of this series, I was keen on the scholarly practice of referencing my sources and highlighting the names of the classical exegetes that *the Study Quran* and Asad cited. Later I found that this was an unnecessary scholastic method that most of my students did not find necessary. It was not a history of tafsir class and the names of these scholarly figures did not mean a whole lot to the students nor could they place them in relation to their theological backgrounds. My handouts after this initial session would just reference *the Study Quran* or Asad, etc. as opposed to listing the classical sources that these works drew upon and cited. Consistent with my observations earlier in this dissertation, I found the hadith-based approach to be familiar to this group of contemporary Muslims, while the rationalist and mystical approaches to tafsir to generally be less familiar. I tried to introduce students to some of these approaches while also being grounded in the hadith narratives.

My first handout did not have any Arabic text in it. I recited the Arabic of the verses and had students take turns reading the translation and commentary provided. A student asked if I could include the Arabic and for the rest of the series, I did so. The inclusion of the Arabic text prompted a concern among some students to give me back the handout at the end of the sessions as they did not want to throw it away because of the sacredness of the Arabic text. Most students, however, did take the handout with them.

I realized that instead of in-depth linguistic analysis of the Qur'anic verses, most beneficial for this group of students pastorally would come from a focus on major themes and inspiration for

their personal lives. I did note some differences between the Qur'anic and Biblical narrative of Joseph, but again, I found that this was not most beneficial for this audience. Besides the two students who had converted to Islam from Christian backgrounds, I did not find that many of them were familiar with the details of the narrative of Joseph in Genesis.

At the first session of the series, I utilized Jawad Qureshi's academic article on the ring structure theory in Sura Yūsuf and copied two of the diagrams from that article which students appreciated. Most of them were not familiar with this theory of how Qur'anic chapters could seen through this organizing mechanism, instead of in a linear fashion. They appreciated this demonstration of "a ring within a ring" structure in the sura.

I also shared Asad's reflection and emphasis that the Qur'an appeals to the rational faculty of human beings. But I also noted that, while this point is true, we are more than just rational beings, we also have emotional and spiritual dimensions. While I included a reference to Jami's poem on the Yūsuf and Zulaykha narrative that is mentioned in the Study Quran, I did not elaborate on it nor did I get the chance to draw from the translation of that work. I did cite a statement from the Sufi author, al-Maybudi, who sees the narrative of Yūsuf as a story primarily about love. However, I did not identify him as a Sufi, in order to avoid any controversy around that term and what it might connotate to the students.

Throughout the series, I emphasized the theme of God's knowledge of all things throughout the sura and pointed out how many times references to this root word of "ilm" (knowledge) was employed. I emphasized personal choice in the narrative, that all individuals have is the present, the past has already happened and the future is unknown. I thought such an approach is more beneficial pastorally. I connected the narrative of Joseph with the narrative of Moses, especially in the 28th chapter of the Qur'an, Sura al-Qasas, and noted some of the parallels in the Qur'anic

narratives of both of these prophets and how each of these prophets had their individual struggles with their people. I noted the emphasis upon calling upon one's Lord through the term "rabbi" (my Lord) and noted the prayer and supplication of Joseph in his time of need as an example for us. We are promised to be tested by God in the Qur'an, I shared, and our success lies in calling upon God for help in facing those challenges. One of the lessons of the narrative that I pointed out was that human beings do not know *when* their dreams or visions or supplications to God will be carried out, but that ultimately, God's plans will be actualized. I also emphasized the idea of redemption and how faulty characters experience growth in the narrative and are not perfect. Students generally appreciated these aspects of being able to relate to the narrative on a human level.

I was anxious that the main characters of the Joseph narrative were male, except for the wife of the 'Aziz, whose name is not mentioned in the Qur'an, but the extra-Qur'anic narrations name as Zulaykha, and I used this name. I was keen on not singling out the female character as being a temptress, but emphasized that both men and women face challenges and tests, including sexual temptations. Although some of the commentaries mention Jacob as having multiple wives, I did not feel it necessary to bring this up, and I wanted to avoid a discussion on polygyny.

I also adjusted the language of the translation from "thou" to "you" and "man" to "human" to be more accessible for this audience. Most of the translations of the Qur'an available in English refer to God with the masculine pronoun as a translation for "huwa" (He). Though in many Muslim settings, this is not seen as problematic, in the university context, there were added sensitivities around this usage for some students. Sometimes, I followed Thomas Cleary's approach in his translation of the Qur'an, where he repeats "God" instead of "He." Sometimes I did not do this and a student made a remark that God is beyond gender or genderless, and that we should not use the masculine pronoun to refer to God. This student modified the language when he was reading

the handout I prepared and repeated "God" for "He" or "Him" in the text. I am aware of at least one recent article that attempts to engage with this issue which also indicates that it is a growing issue in some parts of the Anglophone Muslim community today.[1] I have also found in my conversation with other religious leaders that this is a shared concern across faith traditions.

Some students were very interested in the meaning of dreams and their interpretations and who is qualified to interpret dreams. I did share that some individuals in the Muslim community do interpret dreams and that there are works on dream interpretation such as Ibn Sirrin where he outlines what certain things symbolize. I was frank about my lack of knowledge in any depth concerning this topic. Students also were interested in the idea of envy in relation to Joseph's brothers and their treatment of him. They were also interested in the evil eye and I shared the hadith "The evil eye is true," and shared the prophetic prescription of reciting certain suras for protection.

Some of the student preachers mention hadith or narrations concerning the virtue and religious rank of the four caliphs as understood by Sunni Muslims, which could be alienating to Shi'i students. It has not been my practice to mention those narrations at the end of my Friday sermons, and my sense of the need to be sensitive to and inclusive of Shi'i students reinforces that decision. Part of what shaped this decision is the fact that some of my own teachers do not mention those narrations at the end of their Friday sermons, which is in contrast to some preachers, who end their sermons with reinforcement of the virtue of those four caliphs as "rightly guided" inheritors of the Prophet Muhammad and discourage speaking ill of them. Those concerns also cause me to hesitate from hanging up a poster of beautiful calligraphy a friend offered for the

[1] See Hamza Karamali, "Why Do We Refer to God Using the Masculine Pronoun?" *Basira Education* https://www.basiraeducation.org/blog/why-do-we-refer-to-god-using-the-masculine-pronoun

Muslim prayer room in Earl Hall, which is a shared space for all Muslims, because it features the name of the four caliphs, which I fear could be alienating for Shi'i students. In the beginning of the fall semester, Shi'i students held a dua (supplication) gathering where they recited the famous Dua Kumail from the Shi'i tradition. I attended the dua and encouraged students to attend, regardless of whether they came from a Sunni or Shi'i background. It was not well attended, however. When a student who happens to come from a Shi'i background, and who recited that Dua Kumail beautifully, asked me if he could recite Sura al-Jumua before the Friday prayers, I assented and thought it was a beautiful and noble practice to have some Qur'an recited before the prayers. Another (Sunni) student who knew the sectarian identity of this student asked me if this was specifically a Shi'i practice, and I answered from my experience of observing recitations in Turkey and elsewhere, that it was not specifically a Shi'i tradition, but a noble practice, in more general terms. Part of my own experience has been shaped by the work at the Islamic Center at New York University, which even though has a majority Sunni population, tries to be accommodating for Shi'i students, including by hosting the Muharram gatherings that are especially important to this tradition, and by having a Shi'i scholar as scholar-in-residence at the Center. The Columbia Muslim prayer room also features turbas or round pieces of clay for Shi'i students for use in their ritual prayer. Not all college campuses and mosques have been accommodating to this practice, as can be seen in a recent controversy at another campus and associated Islamic center, in which the turbas were thrown out and removed by Sunnis, in fierce contestation of their presence. I think it is important for Muslims in the United States, and elsewhere, to be able to negotiate and accommodate their differences, instead of engaging in exclusionary polemics and bigotry.

In my teaching of the Cave chapter, I have tried to emphasize the identity of the Companions of the Cave as individuals, as group of youth, rather than reference to them as men, in order to make the lesson from the chapter as relatable to the majority of the attendees of the study circle, who are women. I emphasize teachings such as the need for community and coming together for peer support, to help one another, as a lesson that I think is especially meaningful for this audience of contemporary American Muslims who are a minority on a college campus and in this city and country. I emphasize standing up for one's beliefs and principles, even in the face of persecution, which resonates with many in an age of increased Islamophobia.

When the dog is mentioned in the story of the cave, I did not engage in a discussion of the permissibility or not of keeping dogs which some Muslims in the US might especially be fond of, and I am aware of notable scholars such as Ingrid Mattson, Umar F. Abd-Allah and Khaled Abou El Fadl who have dogs and have written about the permissibility of keeping them with some guidelines, drawing from the Maliki fiqh school. I did not want to open a can of worms, for I am not sure how those nuances in understanding fiqh and legal differences may be received. Instead, I emphasized that even the dog mentioned in the story was blessed by being in good company, which interestingly was mentioned by Ibn Kathīr, and I found it useful to reinforce the importance of community and bonding.

When the Companions of the Cave woke up, they sent one of their group to get "the purest food" and remembering a lecture of Shaykh Hamza Yūsuf as well as efforts by certain American Muslims to go "beyond halal,"[2] emphasize the notion of eating good food. This is understood by some to be in reference to eating organic food, which can be argued was the way that most people ate before the rise of fast food, but can also be attributed to liberal/progressive Michael Pollan type

[2] https://beyondhalal.org/

of emphasis in modern culture and societies. Perhaps this is an example of something which has roots in the Qur'anic text "pure food" (*azka ta'am*) but takes on a renewed vigor or added emphasis in the modern context. Again, the narration of the Companions of the Cave and a commentary like Ibn Kathīr emphasizes the resurrection of both soul and body, and I made a point arguing for the Muslim belief in souls, and against a purely materialist or physicalist understanding of reality.

In commenting on the verse of the Cave chapter which instructs the Prophet to be patient with those who call upon their Lord, I emphasized narrations which highlight the special regard the Prophet had for the underprivileged of his society as opposed to the elites. This seemed to resonate with many students who are interested in how Muslims can be a force for social justice and serving the underserved and working classes of American and global societies. The parable of the gardens also served as a reminder of the finitude and temporality of material possessions, while that which is permanent is one's good deeds which are recorded and will be accounted for in the Hereafter. Satan's major sin was arrogance and this can be tied with arrogance (*kibr*) that is a central animating component of racism, which is another major contemporary concern for American Muslims.

My experience of teaching and discussing these two Qur'anic chapters in the context of a university is another example of how the Qur'an constantly is read and re-read and interpreted in ways that make the text meaningful and relevant to its readers who come to the text with their own concerns. Contemporary Muslims often utilize scholarly resources, but they also ask their own questions and sometimes produce new layers of meaning in their efforts to address the issues of their time. This promises to be an ongoing effort and something that keen observers of Muslim thought ought to pay close attention to.

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