INTERRELIGIOUS DEBATES, RATIONAL THEOLOGY, AND THE ‘ULAMA’ IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: MUḤAMMAD QĀSIM NĀNAUTVĪ AND THE MAKING OF MODERN ISLAM IN SOUTH ASIA

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The nineteenth century was a time of tremendous change for Islamic intellectual traditions in South Asia in an era of colonialism, the decline of traditional authority, and the transformations of modernity. In spite of these challenges, Muslim scholars, theologians, and intellectuals proved to be particularly creative in this period, laying the foundations for the rethinking and reconfiguration of Islamic intellectual traditions in a modern context. The perspectives adopted by modernist and ‘fundamentalist’ Muslims to these modern developments and new contexts have been widely studied. However, the intellectual responses of representatives of the historically continuous classical tradition, the religious scholars (‘ulamā’), theologians, and Sufis, has received far less attention.

Mawlānā Muḥammad Qāsim Nanautvī (1833-1880), among the most important figures of modern Sunni Islam in South Asia, was a prominent religious scholar, philosophical theologian, and Sufi. Although he is best remembered for being the co-founder of the school of Deoband, the most influential South Asian Islamic seminary of the last two centuries, his participation in interreligious debates with Christian missionaries and Hindu reformers, including the first public
Hindu-Muslim polemics, and his articulation of a rational theology for the public sphere are equally significant. Nanautvi’s career and writings provide an insightful lens onto the ways Islamic intellectual traditions came to be reconfigured by the rise of the public sphere, the emergence of reified and oppositional religious identities in South Asia, and the increasing popularity of modern rationalism and empiricism. Nanautvi’s work demonstrates how a Muslim scholar ‘translated’ classical Islamic intellectual traditions, in his case, Islamic philosophy (ḥikmah) and theology, into a new discourse for modern public and pluralistic contexts where Muslim scholars not only had to engage other Muslim scholars, as they did in the past, but to present and justify ‘Islam’ to new Muslim publics as well as non-Muslim scholars and publics. Such a discourse represented a ‘public theology’ that situated and justified Islam as a rational religion vis-à-vis both the claims of other religions and those of modern thought and can serve as a critical example of how Islamic traditions have negotiated continuity and change in the modern world.
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Introduction

Mawłānā Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī (1833-1880) was one of the towering figures of modern Sunni Islam in South Asia. A prominent ʿālim, Sufi, and theologian, he is best remembered for being the co-founder of the school of Deoband, the most influential South Asian Sunni seminary of the last two centuries. His participation in interreligious debates, and his polemical and apologetic writings addressing Hinduism and Christianity are less-well known. Similarly, his chief intellectual project—the articulation of a rational theology for the public sphere—is yet to be studied. This study will aim to introduce these important dimensions of Nānautvī’s thought.

The polemical encounter of Muslim scholars with Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalists in the newly-emergent colonial public sphere of nineteenth-century British India was a significant factor in the construction of new discourses and theologies. These discourses and theologies, by responding to the Other, refashioned how Islamic traditions were understood internally and presented publicly in the modern era. Nānautvī sought to utilize the pre-modern tradition of Islamic philosophical theology and philosophy (ḥikma) to develop a discourse to rationally present Islamic ideals and practices in a pluralistic—and often competitive—public context. This was no longer an internal conversation between Muslim elites, as most of the writings of Muslim scholars had been in the pre-modern era; rather it was one in which not only lay and modern educated Muslims participated but also the lay people and scholars of other religious traditions. Such a discourse thus represented a “public theology” that situated and justified Islam as a rational religion vis-à-vis both the claims of other religions and those of modernity. And it can serve as a critical example of how Islamic traditions have negotiated continuity and change in the modern world.
Thematic Overview of the Project and Review of Related Literature

Nānautvī, as a founder of Deoband and an important theologian involved in apologetics and polemics, is an important figure in the annals of Muslim revivalism and scholarship in the modern period, particularly in South Asia. It is surprising, then, that very little has been written on him in European languages, although some very useful secondary literature exists in Urdu (Gīlānī 1953; Ṭayyīb 1967; Kandhālī 2000). In Chapter One, I discuss at length the methodological reasons for this neglect of Nānautvī and his work. A sense of his personality (Nānautvī 1977) and intellectual and religious concerns (Nānautvī 1967, 1969, 1998) emerges from the primary literature. The most detailed discussion of Nānautvī in Western languages is to be found in Barbara Metcalf’s excellent work on the seminary at Deoband (Metcalf 1982) which contextualizes and discusses the life and work of Nānautvī but does not significantly discuss his intellectual output (see also the Urdu history of Deoband: Rizvi 1980), which I intend to examine. For a brief introduction to his theological views and a translation of one of his theological treatises, written against the Muslim modernism of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, see the edited volume by Aziz Ahmad and von Grunebaum (Ahmad and von Grunebaum 1970), which also gives translations of primary sources of other important figures in his milieu (A. Ahmad 1967).

A broader framework places Nānautvī in the traditions of Islamic revival that began in the 18th century (although these can often be traced back to developments in the 17th century) (Voll 1974, 1980; Dallal 1993). In South Asia, the keystone for this tradition is Shāh Walī Allāh (though precursors include Aḥmad Sirhindī and ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq Dihlavī) (Baljōn 1986), to whom Nānautvī is related, not only intellectually as a source for his ideas, but also historically in a direct chain of teacher-student relationships that goes back to the Delhi polymath (Ghazi 2002). The seminary at
Deoband was established precisely to replace the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya of Shāh Walī Allāh and his sons, which had been demolished after the 1857 uprising. Another lineage Nānautvī belongs to is that of reformist Sufi Aḥmad Barelvī (M. Ahmad 1975; Pearson 1979) through Nānautvī’s Sufi master, Hajjī Imdād Allāh (Nizami 1983), who also furnished him with a Chishti-Sabri lineage (Ernst and Lawrence 2002; Fiyud al-Rahman 1997). Imdād Allāh was the spiritual master of many ‘ulama’ despite himself not being an ʿālim. And he also provided the spiritual guidance behind the founding of Deoband, according to its founders.

Another intellectual lineage to which Nānautvī belonged was his link to the British-established university he studied at to complement his traditional education, Delhi College (Pernau 2003, 2006) where he was taught by Mamlūk ʿAlī (Kandhalvī 2009), himself a product of the Walī Allāhī tradition and a link between it and modern forms of education. Nānautvī’s influence can be seen in how future Deobandis have eulogized him and also have carried on his intellectual interests, particularly the intellectual defense of religion (Ṭayyab 1967; Thānvī n.d.; Naeem 2004). I discuss this intellectual genealogy in detail in Chapter One.

In addition to situating him in the networks and discourses of Islamic revivalism, Nānautvī must also be situated more specifically in the context of the emergence of modernity, brought to the Muslim world largely through European domination—intellectual, economic, political, and later, cultural—and colonialism. A very useful typology for this purpose is provided by S.H. Nasr (S. H. Nasr 1987), through which he traces the multiple Muslim responses to European domination and incipient modernity and divides them into the categories of: messianism, modernism, puritanical reformism, (often termed ‘fundamentalism’), and tradition. This typology is complemented by that of Voll (Voll 2003). I discuss these typologies and their utility in Chapter One. Applying this classification to the context of South Asia, the messianic perspective was
exemplified by Ghulām Aḥmad Qādiānī (Friedmann 1989), the modernist initially by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (Troll 1979), the fundamentalist by the Ahl-i Ḥadīth in the 19th century but more influentially, Mawdūdī in the 20th century (S.V.R. Nasr 1996), and the traditionalist by the ‘ulama’ (who almost always also belonged to Sufi traditions), of which the most important in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the two rival orientations of Deoband, the main figures of which were: Nānautvī, Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (Ingram 2009), later Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī (Naeem 2004, 2009; Zaman 2008), and Aḥmad Razā Khān’s Ahl-i Sunnat wa-l-Jamāʿat—often referred to as Barelvī (Sanyal 1996, 2005; Naeem 2009).

A key point that can be highlighted using this typology is the relative neglect in much Western scholarship of the representatives of tradition, the ‘ulama’ and the Sufis—or as has largely been the norm in the post-classical era, the figure of the ‘ālim/Sufi. Reasons for this neglect include: a privileging of the classical period (Hodgson 1974, vol.1) combined with a theory of Muslim decline, which relegated later Islamic intellectual history to obscurity; the preference for change over continuity (Keddie 1972) and “originality” over the perceived monotony of tradition; the modern paradigm of progress which saw the ‘ulama’ as outmoded artifacts soon to disappear; the identification of modernity with change, and dynamism and tradition with stasis. As a result of this emphasis, modernists and their nemeses, “fundamentalists”, have been given far more attention in scholarly works. And as Orientalism was internalized in the post-colonial world, nationalist writings in South Asia, as elsewhere, have also excluded the ‘ulama’ from nationalist narratives. In South Asia, this has led to tremendous amounts of literature and discussion being devoted to figures like Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Muḥammad Iqbāl, and Mawdūdī, and very little attention being paid to the ‘ulama’ and Sufis, even when they wielded immense influence on large amounts of people—as was the case for men like Nānautvī and Thānvī.
Fortunately, there has recently been a renewed interest in the discourses of the ‘ulama’ in the modern period (See the edited volume by Hatina 2009; for South Asia: Metcalf 1982, Robinson 2001, Zaman 2002). I intend to build upon this by studying Nānaūtvī as an ʿālim, which provides a more precise and self-referential description of him than other categories such as revivalist or reformer. This also places him in the larger category of what has recently been described as late Sunni traditionalism (Brown 2009). In addition to new interest in the ‘ulama’, new theoretical approaches to the concept of tradition (MacIntyre 1990; Asad 1993; Waldman 1986) can be very useful in revisiting the significance of the category in the study of modern Islam and enable us to situate ‘ulama’ like Nānaūtvī as important re-interpreters of Islamic traditions in a period of crisis and change. These new approaches to the concept of tradition challenge essentialized views of this concept as static or outmoded by emphasizing its creativity and dynamic possibilities. This is significant because it can be argued that the influence of the ‘ulama’ actually increased in the modern period in many Muslim societies. In India, after the marginalization followed by the abolition of the Muslim state and the breakdown of traditional authority, the ‘ulama’ came to fill the role of defining normative modes of thought and behavior and exemplifying moral and religious ideals for the Muslim populace in an unprecedented manner (Robinson 2003).

In order to situate 19th-century developments in the broader history of Islam in South Asia, a number of important studies on Islam in India exist. The older works are still useful (Hardy 1972; Schimmel 1980), although sometimes dated (A. Ahmad 1964), and newer works offer insightful—often revisionist—perspectives (Eaton 2000; Robinson 2003, 2007; Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006; Malik 2008). For intellectual history, the voluminous and unwieldy but very informative works of S.A.A. Rizvi are especially useful (Rizvi 1965, 1980, 1982). I also aim to
reflect on the significance of South Asia to the wider Islamic world and to include it in a more panoramic view of Islamdom, to use Hodgson’s term, than the Orientalist perspective. The latter tended to conflate Islam with its Arab sector, resulting in the “Arabist bias”, to use another term by Hodgson (Hodgson 1974, vol. 1). Particularly in the modern period, South Asia can serve as a template of patterns that can be observed in much of the Islamic world, due to its early colonization, its multi-religious population, and its early responses to modernity. In addition, the modern period also reveals an extensive networking between South Asia and other Islamic lands (Voll 1980, Gran 1979). It is in this framework that the work of Nānautvī can be seen to have a broader significance for the Islamic world than just for intellectual developments in South Asia.

Another central dimension of my study, explored both in Chapter 3 in the context of Hindu-Muslim interactions and Chapter 4 in the context of public interreligious debates in the colonial period, is to chart the significance of interreligious exchange—debate, dialogue, polemic, apologetic—in the shaping of religious traditions. In the academic study of religion, the significance of interreligious exchange for the development of particular religious traditions has often been overlooked due to a number of factors, including the identification of particular religious traditions with particular geographic areas and a casting of religions as bounded and self-enclosed. In the context of South Asia, this has meant a neglect of the Islamic tradition, which is identified with the Near East, and an emphasis on Hindu traditions through the discipline of Indology, which identifies India precisely with Hindu and other indigenous traditions. Practically, this has meant an obscuring of the rich interreligious exchange between Hindu and Muslim traditions in South Asia over the last millennium and the tremendous impact that they have had on each other in the Indian climate, mirroring other instances of interreligious exchanges in Islamic history, such as those between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the early
Islamic period and in Muslim Spain. British Orientalism, beginning in the colonial period, came to categorize the religions of India into strict “high tradition” forms of “Hinduism”—itself a constructed category (Bloch et al 2010)—and “Islam”, leading to both the differentiation and homogenization of these traditions (Sila-Khan 2004). In order to classify the messy hybridity and fluidity of the religious landscape of colonial India, the British posited “pure” and “pristine” forms of Hinduism and Islam of which the myriad local variations were degradations. This can be seen, for example, in the identification of Hinduism with Sanskrit and of Islam with Arabic and Persian, along with the application of Western categories such as orthodoxy, heterodoxy, and syncretism onto the Indian religious landscape. This background, supplemented by colonial introductions such as the census, which reified religious identity (Cohn 1987), and the apologia for colonial British rule which divided the history of India into three periods—the Hindu golden age, the destructive age of Muslim invasions, and the restorative era of the British (Ernst 1992)—provides central elements in the rise of communalism in South Asia. This emergence of communalism, however, has often been charted through a socio-political lens: whereas British policies and riots between Hindus and Muslims are highlighted (Pandey 1990; Freitag 1989), the roles of theological developments are rarely investigated, a lacuna this project aims to fill. For this, the contribution of Nānautvī is central as his debates with Swami Dayananda (Jordens 1978; Yadav 1978) of the Arya Samaj (Jones 1976) are likely the first historical instances of a complex polemical exchange between Hindu and Muslim scholars on a theological plane (Gīlānī 1953).

Related to the issues discussed above, the epistemic separation of Hinduism and Islam into separate self-enclosed units and the concurrent rise of communalism in South Asia in the 19th century, has led to the development of Orientalist and nationalist historiographies that anachronistically read back contemporary political and cultural developments onto the whole
history of Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia (Ernst 2011; compare with Friedmann 2003). I will try to present an alternative historiography that critiques these Orientalist and nationalist moves, and attempts to take into account both the integrity of differing religious and cultural traditions, and their complex overlaps and interactions in different places and times (Sila-Khan 2004; Pirbhai 2009). For the theoretical navigation of the issues of identity and difference, and self and other, I apply the discussions of these issues by the scholar of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith (Smith 2004).

Of great significance in the discussion of interreligious encounters in the 19th century is the arrival of Christian missionaries in South Asia and the tremendous impact they had on the religious discourse of the region. The impact of Christian missionaries was first felt by the Hindu traditions, resulting in the development of forms of Hindu revivalism, represented primarily by the Arya Samaj established by Dayananda, which internalized Christian categories yet became chief opponents of the presence of Christianity—as well as Islam—in South Asia (Jones 1976, 1989). Christian missionaries soon targeted Muslims for proselytism, which also meant they attacked Islam. The most important exchange in the early period of Muslim-Christian polemic was the debate between the German Pietist missionary Karl Pfänder and the Muslim scholar Karāmat Allāh Kairānvī, which became of significant influence not only in South Asia but throughout the Muslim world due to Kairānvī’s use of recent European developments in Biblical criticism to undercut Christian claims (Powell 1976, 1993). A central contribution of the missionaries was to generate particular discourses, whether regarding idolatry, monotheism, jihad, or many other issues that would not have existed without their presence. Through debates between religious traditions in the emergent public sphere, these issues became crucial, indeed comprising the very ‘public’ face of those religions. And as polemics generated apologetics, and
were supplemented and often paralleled by issues stemming from European liberalism, these discourses became more central within the religious traditions that were being critiqued. They came to define how increasing numbers of Muslims—and Hindus—justified their religious traditions in modern settings. This is one way in which Nānautvī’s apologetic writings in defense of Islamic teachings and practices—written in response to the attacks of Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalists that drew on Christian critiques—can be approached as representative of traditional Muslim attempts to justify religion in a new ethos which was competitively multi-religious and increasingly secularist at the same time. They can also reveal how issues regarding Islamic practices that were first raised in a polemical context came to be incorporated into mainstream Muslim self-understandings over time.

To contextualize the religious polemics of late colonial India such as that between Nānautvī and Dayananda or between Nānautvī and Christian missionaries, it is informative to trace their genealogy to the major transformations—political, social, religious, and epistemic—that were occurring as South Asia under British colonial rule. I especially focus on these transformations in Chapter 3. A particularly useful tool for such analysis is anthropologist Bernard Cohn’s notion (itself reliant on the work of Michel Foucault) of new “discursive formations” in colonial India and how they established new epistemological spaces, fashioned new discourses, and re-invented categories, in the process turning Indian forms of knowledge into European objects. (Cohn 1996) In his work, Cohn examined how new discursive formations came into being in colonial India in the domains of language, law, and governance due to British policies and the effects they had on Indian epistemic and cultural spaces. A similar process can be seen in the evolution of South Asian religious discourses under colonialism, resulting in the emergence of the polemical discursive space inhabited by late 19th-century Indian religious revival and reform movements.
The work of Peter van der Veer is also useful in theorizing the transformations brought out by colonialism and their effects on South Asian religious traditions (Van der Veer 1999, 2001).

The concept of the public sphere plays an important role in my argument. This concept, which has a long tradition in European thought, (Gripsrud et al 2010) was most influentially explicated by German philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas (Habermas 1984), on whose work I will rely, supplemented by interlocutors who have sought to apply the concept to Islamic (Hoexter et al 2002, Salvatore 2007, Asad 1993) and South Asian (Reetz 2006) contexts. Habermas’ theory builds on the initial European experience of modernity—particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie—to explain the rise of the public sphere as a space between the official and governmental sphere and the sphere of private affairs. And the spread of modernity through colonialism and the emergence of the Western world system (Beyer 2006) resulted in non-Western societies, such as the Islamic and South Asian, undergoing processes paralleling the European experience. In the context of colonial South Asia, public arenas (Freitag 1989) of discourse can be seen to emerge through several different factors, including the introduction of print (Robinson 2003), the spread of education, social mobilization through new forms of collective identities, and the emergence of religion as an identity marker. As was mentioned above, specific British policies and attitudes towards South Asian religious traditions as well as Christian proselytism helped to create a public arena of religious discourse that was mediated neither by the colonial administration nor by any one religious group. Rather, it truly represented a new discourse where differing perspectives came together to debate and discuss their ideas. It is here that another central element of my project emerges, for which I will draw on Habermas’ later work regarding communicative action and rationality as an inherent aspect of the public sphere (Habermas 1984).
As a discourse neither rooted in nor controlled by either the state or specific confessional perspectives, the participants in the South Asian polemics and apologetics of the late-nineteenth century had to devise new ways of formulating and presenting their religious traditions. The relatively secure places of discussion within traditional discourses in which participants all spoke variants of the same language and shared a set of givens now had to exist alongside a broader intellectual arena where the participants did not necessarily share givens nor speak the same conceptual language. In this situation, in order for any real conversation to occur, such bases of mutual understanding had to be established. This was the situation that Nānautvī addressed when he decided to participate both personally and through his writings in interreligious polemics and apologetics. The two tools he used to address the new situation was recourse to the language and methods of rationality, and knowledge of his opponent’s traditions. As was mentioned above, Nānautvī stood in the tradition of Shāh Walī Allāh, the Delhi polymath who had synthesized the transmitted (manqūlāt), intellectual (maʿqūlāt), and spiritual (makshūfāt) sciences (Khan 1992). In his magnum opus, Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālisha [The Conclusive Argument from God] (Walī Allāh 1996), Walī Allah presented a detailed rational analysis of the tenets and practices of religion and the reasons behind the doctrines of the Islamic tradition in view of theological anthropology and sociology. It was this emphasis on rationality and its use in explaining and justifying religious doctrines and practices that Nānautvī came to champion in his speeches and works. In his works such as Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr, he argues how the intellect is the greatest gift given by God to humankind and his arguments there are postulated not as “Islamic” arguments, but as rational ones that independently prove the truth and superiority of the Islamic tradition. In exploring at length Nānautvī’s rational defense of religion, I will also place him in the little-studied tradition of later Sunni philosophy and philosophical theology in South Asia. While it has often been
supposed in scholarship on Islamic intellectual traditions that philosophy was dealt a death blow in the Sunni world by Al-Ghazzālī from which it never recovered, the survival of an independent philosophical tradition in Sunni lands and the absorption of philosophy into theology has been overlooked (Nasr 2006). These intellectual traditions particularly flourished in Muslim India, as can be seen in the synthesis of Shāh Wāfī Allāh; and Nānautvī represents a late instance of the development of philosophical theology and its application to a new situation that called for the deployment of rationality in defense of religion. These philosophical and theological traditions that were referred to as ḥikmah in the later period and Nānautvī’s reliance on them to articulate a rational theology for the modern public sphere is the theme of Chapter 2.

My method of investigating the hypotheses set above is to first situate Nānautvī in the context of his own religious and intellectual tradition and in the trajectory of changes occurring in the Muslim world in general, and South Asia in particular—due to the arrival of modernity and the experience of colonialism—with all the complexities outlined above. Following this, I investigate the specific involvement of Nānautvī in interreligious exchanges in South Asia and the manner in which he navigated these encounters both in his public debates and his writings. I will examine in detail: his speeches, as recorded in Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, the definitive account of the Mayla-i khudāshanāsī (Festival of the Knowledge of God) where he debated Christian missionaries and Hindu Arya Samajists; as well as his writings, particularly the works most significant in relation to his participation in interreligious polemics and apologetics. These include: (1) Ḥujjat al-Islām (The Proof of Islam), his principal theological treatise written against Christian missionary claims which critiques Christian doctrine from the viewpoint of Islamic theological anthropology based on the idea of the intrinsic goodness of humankind as opposed to original sin; (2) Qibla-numā, his principal theological defense against Dayananda’s claims that
Islam is not monotheistic and that Muslim reverence of the Ka’ba is identical to idolators’ worship of idols; (3) A collection of answers to criticisms of Dayananda against the tenets and practices of Islam, ranging from issues of metaphysics and reincarnation, to women’s rights, published posthumously as *Intiṣār al-Islām* (The Victory of Islam); (4) *Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr*, his chief theological treatise on the rationality of religion in general and Islam in particular. I closely examine these texts to bring out the fullness of Nānautvī’s intellectual project in relation to the intellectual milieu and the above-mentioned transformations of colonial South Asia. This can help us reflect on: how Nānautvī carved out a particular discourse of significance and influence for traditional Islam in modern South Asia; how his works represent the manner in which Islamic traditions have engaged in creative interplay with other religious and secular traditions to develop new self-identities; and how continuity and change have precisely operated in Islamic traditions in the modern world.
Chapter 1: Introducing Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī

In the academic writing of intellectual history, when we seek to approach an intellectual figure from the past, we primarily rely on two sources: his own works and his reception history, which is all that others have said about him, from his own time down to the present, whether in the form of biography, hagiography, or anecdote. A third source, one which requires more interpretation from the scholar but is no less important, is the pre-history of the intellectual figure—the often multifarious channels, influences, traditions that combined to give us the individual intellectual life and work under examination. From these central sources, we try to reconstruct a picture of the figure; this reconstruction, however, relies on our own location, emphases, and creative imagination. This reconstruction is thus a new portrait, but one which, while trying to be faithful to the original sources and their historical and contemporary interpretations, becomes a part of the intellectual project of the scholar writing it. It is with this consciousness that I turn to the study of the life and work of Nānautvī in this and subsequent chapters. In this chapter, we will begin with examining the modern scholarly context of Islamic studies and what kind of effect its assumptions and guiding norms have had on the study of figures like Nānautvī. What do I mean by “figures like Nānautvī”? What I mean are characteristics such as being a traditional religious scholar (ʿālim), being a representative of the late Islamic philosophic-theological tradition (ḥikma), living in the emergent modern world under Western colonial rule, and being a South Asian. Following this, we will look at the pre-history of Nānautvī and the kind of Islamic traditions produced in a South Asian context that informed his life and work, highlighting his most significant predecessors as well as the religious and intellectual movements that led to and comprised his specific intellectual milieu. Finally, we will conclude with a short biographical portrait. In further chapters, I will expand on this
biography and closely examine some of his major theological and apologetic works, using them to paint a new picture of Nānautvī, which builds on that of his biographers but differs from them in its concerns, emphases, and purpose.

Problematising the Historiography of Islam in the Modern Period

I. The Decline Thesis

A chief problem in approaching Nānautvī through secondary sources in European languages is his conspicuous absence. It is this absence that I will try to account for by addressing some of the central problems in the scholarly historiography of Islam and the ways these prejudice the study of Islam particularly in South Asia but also in the modern period. If Nānautvī is a major figure in modern Islam, if for nothing else than being the co-founder of the most important Muslim seminary established in modern times, then the paucity of research on him and his works indicates a possible blind spot in the study of modern Islam. It becomes even more surprising that so little has been written on him, since Nānautvī was the first important Muslim scholar to respond to emergent Muslim modernism in South Asia, the first to publicly debate Hindu scholars in the long history of Islam in India, and among the first to articulate a rational Islam that could compete with other religions as well as modern epistemological claims in the emergent public sphere.

But we should not be so surprised. Once one delves into the scholarly assumptions of the modern study of Islam, it becomes clearer how Nānautvī is far from being the only important modern Muslim who has been left out of prevalent narratives about Islam in the modern world. There are
a number of reasons for this. One that looms particularly large and through which some of the other reasons can be approached is what can be called the “decline thesis”.

The “decline thesis” has been a major historiographical device in Western studies of Islam in the modern period. This thesis stipulates that Islamic civilization was once vital, creative, and progressive, being at the forefront of philosophy, science, and culture, but then decadence set in and Muslims regressed until their present, more-or-less decrepit situation. The West, in this trajectory, had the opposite fortune, going from the backwardness of the dark ages and medieval period to the advancement of its modern civilization. Being originally a product of the colonial era, this thesis still has widespread currency on the popular level among Euro-Americans and Muslims alike.¹ For European colonialists and Orientalists, this theory served to justify the notion that the West can bring civilization and modernity to Muslims while at the same time denying the value of contemporary Muslim intellectual and cultural life. The decline thesis, however, was not merely a subversive colonial tool but was based in central assumptions that are common in Western modernity such as measuring the value of a civilization or society based on factors that justify the “advanced” nature of modern Western society, such as material progress, modern science, rationality, and humanism. In fact, the whole paradigm is built on modern notions of linear progress and development, where the West leads the universal path to human advancement and other cultures are assumed to follow.²

One problem with this decline thesis is that it relegates the history of Muslim societies and their intellectual and cultural life since roughly 1300 to be an era of decline and therefore, not worthy of serious study and examination. This is one explanation of the almost complete neglect of later

¹ It has its defenders such as Bernard Lewis. See: Bernard Lewis, What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
Muslim intellectual life in the richly creative contexts of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires as well as smaller polities in Africa and the Malay archipelago. This later history of Islamic lands and peoples was thus often left to colonial officials and later, diplomatic and political historians, who were generally not interested in Muslim intellectual and cultural productions.

For our purposes, this neglect can be witnessed in the context of South Asia by the complete lack of attention among modern Western as well as South Asian scholars to Muslim intellectual life in the Mughal and post-Mughal periods. The only figures that receive some attention such as Sirhindī and Shāh Walī Allāh do so for their socio-political projects that are in line with modern nationalist historiographies or modern Islamic reformism. That these figures had highly creative Sufi, theological, and philosophical works has received scant attention, not to mention the countless other figures or even schools and traditions, some of which will be briefly mentioned below, that do not figure into scholarly or popular discussions at all.

A related dimension of the decline thesis is that it valorizes a particular “golden age” or high point of Islamic civilization from which Muslims have been in decline since. This golden age is, however, often based on the work of Orientalists who adopted the self-narrative of Muslim scholars in the classical era filtered through a Christian concern for orthodoxy, thereby enshrining classical Sunni, legalist, Ashʿarī, and Arab expressions of Islam as constituting “orthodoxy”. Although this notion of what constitutes normative Islam has been changing among certain scholars of Islam in recent decades, it nonetheless remains an often unspoken

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3 My argument presupposes that “orthodoxy” is largely a Christian construct that is applied to Islam, which does not have the same central investment in doxa as Christianity, as can be seen by the relatively secondary importance of theology (kalām) among Muslim disciplines. For a survey of the ways orthodoxy is used in Islamic studies, see Robert Langer and Udo Simon, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: Dealing with Divergences in Muslim Discourses and Islamic Studies,” Die Welt des Islam 48 (2008): 273-288.
assumption in which interpretations of Islam are privileged. One can test this assumption by asking how often categories divergent from each of these—for example, Shīʿī, mystical, philosophical, and non-Arab—are considered to be normative, authentic, or orthodox expressions of Islam. One of the major problems with this identification of Islam with the classical era is that it overlooks many of the intellectual and cultural developments of the succeeding centuries. These include, for example, the ever increasing symbiosis of the legal and Sufi traditions, such that in the later centuries prior to the modern era, it is hard to find a major Muslim legal scholar who does not also belong to a Sufi order, particularly in South Asia. Nānautvī stands as an example of this overlapping of the discourses of the ‘ulama’ and the Sufis: being both trained in the transmitted sciences, a practicing Sufi, and even a Sufi master to some of his students, his works seamlessly integrate Sufi elements without explicitly being mystical.

A similar problem, which we will look at more below, is the identification of the Ashʿarī critique of philosophy with the Islamic scholarly tradition as a whole. Again, in later centuries, philosophy was revived, particularly in the East of the Islamic world including South Asia, and often a mode of discourse was developed which combined theological and philosophical, and often mystical, concerns and language. These later developments of philosophical theology, which Nānautvī was a representative of, have also thereby received little attention. Finally, as we are dealing with South Asia, it is important to note that the valorization of the classical period along with other forms of bias, has resulted in the persistence of what Marshall Hodgson called the “Arabistic bias”, which posits a center-periphery relationship between the classical Arab lands and the rest of the Muslim world combined with a privileging of the Arabic language as constitutive of Muslim cultural and intellectual life. This, of course, results in the relative

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marginalization of other parts of the Islamicate world as well as productions in other Islamicate languages.

The decline thesis may have had its origins in nineteenth-century European writings but has taken on renewed life among Muslims with both modernists as well as fundamentalists justifying their views of Islamic history and their contemporary projects through it. On this subject, Khaled El-Rouayheb notes:

Scholarship of the past fifty years on Islamic intellectual history has tended to focus on either the early, formative period or the modern period. The intervening “post-classical” era, roughly from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth, is therefore still largely unexplored and often the subject of ill-informed conjecture. It has regularly been sweepingly dismissed as a period of general intellectual and artistic “sclerosis” or “decadence,” and numerous explanations have been offered to explain this supposed fact. The nineteenth-century French author Ernest Renan was one of the first to speculate thus, but many modern political and religious movements in the Islamic world have been engaged in a similar exercise. For liberal modernists, the villains responsible for “decline” are typically “obscurantist,” “anti-rationalist” currents: Sufis, Ashʿarīs, or Ḥanbalī fideists. For fundamentalists (Salafīs), the villains are typically the mystics, theologians, and philosophers who adulterated the “pure” Islam of the pious earliest generations with Neoplatonism, Greek logic, unbridled speculation, and popular syncretistic practices. For Arab nationalists, it was typically “Mongol barbarism” and/or “Turkish domination” that was to blame…Such grand narratives rest on little or no evidence and appear to tell us more about the people making them than about the period in question.5

El-Rouayheb’s remarks demonstrate that the neglect of the post-classical era is not simply a scholarly mistake but is instead very closely tied to the grand narratives and projects of different competing groups in the Muslim world such as the modernists and the fundamentalists. Both of these groups equally militate against the centuries of scholarly, cultural, spiritual, and artistic developments that characterized Islamicate societies up to the modern period, albeit for different

reasons. The characteristics assigned to this time period are seen to be the very ones that Muslims are urged by both modernists and fundamentalists to disassociate themselves from.\(^6\)

Another important dimension of the decline thesis is that it privileges change over continuity, in keeping with modern theories of progress. Change is identified with creativity, dynamism, and modernity; continuity with the outmoded, static, and traditional. This dimension of the decline thesis is particularly felt in discussions of modern Muslim societies where those forces and figures that represent change receive tremendous attention at the expense of those that are seen to represent continuity and tradition. Therefore, much modern scholarship on Muslim intellectual life of the last two centuries focuses exclusively on Muslim modernists, who adapt to Western modernity, and Muslim “fundamentalists” who are seen as rejecting it, even though the situation is far more complex. Both of these movements and the figures associated with it are seen to be representative of change, and therefore worthy of note. Those associated with older paradigms, no matter their creativity, influence, or popularity, are paid little attention. Most significantly, these include the ‘ulama’, traditional Muslim scholars, and the Sufis; although, as mentioned above, these two functions were often combined in the same person in the later centuries.

II. Nationalist Historiography

From the above, it should also be clear that Western historiography is not alone in largely ignoring figures like Nānautvī. As eluded to by El-Rouayheb, in addition to modernist and fundamentalist narratives, there are also nationalist ones among contemporary Muslims. It is largely due to their nationalist emphasis that popular South Asian historiographies also leave out figures like Nānautvī because they do not fit neatly into the narrative that they are attempting to

construct. Muslim nationalist historiography in South Asia has largely focused on figures that served to construct an alternative memory—one which responded to the waning fortunes of Indian Muslims during the colonial era and their cataclysmic fall from ruling over large parts of the Subcontinent, to being a beleaguered minority under foreign rule and domestic competition and conflict from other religious groups. This reconstructed memory was perhaps first articulated in the powerful poems of the very influential Urdu poet Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914). Hali identified the fortunes of the Muslims of South Asia with the rise and fall of Muslim power in South Asia, thus enshrining Muslim political and military leaders as the central figures in the Muslim nationalist imaginary.7

This focus on Muslim political and military leaders at the expense of other important Muslims such as the ‘ulama’, Sufis, poets, philosophers, and men of letters, was further exacerbated by the rise of the two-nation theory. This theory stipulated that Hindus and Muslims had always been distinct—often opposed—communities, a notion articulated in service of the desired ideal of a Muslim homeland in South Asia.8 This narrative took as its heroes those Muslims of the South Asian past and present that could be utilized to argue for a distinct Islamic identity in the Subcontinent. So political and military leaders, who could be seen to champion Islam in South Asia, were again given central prominence in the project. Thus, men like Muḥammad Bin Qāsim, the young Arab warrior who conquered Sindh in 711, the Turkic sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna9, who conquered parts of western India in the eleventh century, neither of whom made South Asia

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7 For Hali’s contribution to the construction of Muslim nationalism in South Asia as well as other foundational figures and texts, see Raja Maqsood, Constructing Pakistan: Foundational Texts and the Rise of Muslim National Identity 1857-1947 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
8 For further discussion of the emergence of the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, see Ch. 3 below.
9 For how a figure like Maḥmūd was reconstructed as a proto-Muslim nationalist iconoclast opposed to “Hinduism”, see Romila Thapar, Somanatha: the Many Voices of a History (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), discussed further in Ch. 3. For a short overview, see my “Mahmud of Ghazna,” Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
their home, and Aurangzeb, the emperor who was the most antagonistic of the Mughals toward non-Muslim Indian traditions, gained a central role in the nationalist history of Muslim India, while countless figures that were more representative of Muslim traditions in India were neglected. With the exception of a few intellectual figures, who could be retrospectively used to justify twentieth-century nationalism due to their emphasis on retaining an Islamic identity in “heathen” South Asia, much of the intellectual, cultural, and religious life of South Asian Muslims throughout the centuries of the Muslim presence in South Asia were almost completely marginalized. A most important example of this kind of anachronistic portrayal is to be found in the figure of Aḥmad Sirhindī, now popularly known as the Mujaddid Alīf-i Thānī, the renewer of the second Islamic millennium. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalist-minded writers began to portray Sirhindī as an early proponent of the two-nation theory due to his criticism of Hindu idolatry and practices, and his championing of reinvigorating Prophetic practices among South Asian Muslims, giving these ideas far more political and social significance than the limited influence they had in their milieu. Hitherto, Sirhindī was remembered as an important Sufi. Now, he was converted to a socio-political reformer fighting against the corruptions of a Hindu environment for the political glory of Islam and Muslims in South Asia. 10

In addition, modern Muslim historiography in South Asia was also greatly influenced by colonial British Orientalism and its constructions of Islam and Muslim history in South Asia, partially through the agency of Aligarh College, which was established in response to the marginalization

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10 The first important writer to portray Sirhindī and other historical Muslim figures along Muslim nationalist lines was Abu al-Kalām Āzād, perhaps the most intellectually important Muslim nationalist in his Tadhkira. His ideas were further spread by the popular history of Muslim scholars of India written by Muhammad Miyan, Ulamā’-i hind kā shāndār māzī (Karachi: Maktabah-i Maḥmūd, n.d.). See also Burhan Ahmad Faruqi’s The Mujaddid’s Conception of Tawḥīd (Lahore: Idarah-i Adabiyyat-i Delli, 1940), which takes a similar view. For a corrective, see Yohanan Friedmann, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Prosperity (Montreal: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1971), Ch. 9.
of Muslims after the 1857 uprising and whose mission included introducing Muslims to modern Western ideas. This led to the internalization of certain theses mentioned above such as: the idea of a continuous decline of Islamic civilization and Muslim intellectual life, since its early “golden age”; the identification of Muslim scholarly traditions and their representatives as outmoded obstacles to progress and modernity; and the identification of Islam and Arab. The internalization of these theses was particularly pronounced among modernist and modern-educated Muslims but increasingly penetrated all segments of Muslim society in South Asia.

Also, very significantly, British colonial perceptions of Islam were adopted by Muslims themselves, shaping the new nationalist understanding of Muslim identity in South Asia. From a sometimes bewildering diversity of practices, languages, and interpretations of Islam found among South Asian Muslims in the pre-modern period, a new notion of “Muslim nation” or even “Muslim community” was etched out by identifying Islam with certain generalized characteristics, often through a colonial Western lens, while de-emphasizing or even eliminating the more localized dimensions of Muslim belief and practice, and collectivizing Muslim identity.

Peter Hardy comments:

Writing in November 1888, the Viceroy of India, Lord Dufferin (1826-1902), described the Muslims of British India as a “nation of 50 million, with their monotheism, their iconoclastic fanaticism, their animal sacrifices, their social equality and their remembrance of the days, when, enthroned at Delhi, they reigned supreme from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin.” Lord Dufferin’s etching of his image of British India’s Muslims is worth disinterring from the records of British rule in India because it expresses vividly the image of themselves which

modern-educated Indian Muslims came to have in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries...But it was an image which would have startled the Muslims of that earlier, pre-British, period...Scattered unevenly over a subcontinent the size of Western Europe, divided by sectarian beliefs, dietary habits and often by language, most often under Muslim but some...under non-Muslim rule, medieval Muslims did not think or act as a nation.\footnote{Peter Hardy, \textit{The Muslims of British India} (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972). This remains the best general historical study of Muslims in British India.}

Despite this widespread influence of nationalist, modernist, and increasingly, fundamentalist, interpretations of Muslim history in South Asia, both the ‘ulama’ and the Sufis have remained surprisingly relevant in South Asia, both in terms of their popularity among ordinary Muslims and in terms of their intellectual production.\footnote{One of many examples that could be given of this phenomenon is the contemporary popularity of the Pakistani jurist and scholar Muftī Taqī ‘Uṣmānī, working in the Deobandi tradition of Nānautvī, whose writings are analyzed in Kelly Pemberton, “An Islamic Discursive Tradition on Reform as Seen in the Writing of Deoband’s Muftī Taqī ‘Uṣmānī,” \textit{Muslim World} 99:3 (July 2009): 452-477.} Although Nānautvī was a theologian as well as a Sufi, it is as a religious scholar that he is best remembered. And if there is a category that integrates these dimensions along with his founding of Deoband and his role in delineating its orientation, it is that of the ‘ulama’ as understood in the later South Asian tradition, who were trained not only in the transmitted or religious sciences, but also in the rational sciences, as well as spiritual or mystical disciplines. The neglect of Nānautvī in modern studies of the Islamic world can be further understood through the widespread neglect of representatives of “tradition” in the modern world, of which the ‘ulama’ are the foremost representatives in modern Muslim societies.

III. The ‘Ulama’ in Modern Scholarship

In order to understand the perception of the ‘ulama’ in modern Western scholarship, it may be useful to begin with an influential and representative scholar working on contemporary Islam. In a post-9/11 work, Olivier Roy outlines the various possibilities of Muslim accommodation with
globalization. He argues that globalization can be accommodated by Muslims through (1) a liberal reformist view of Islam; (2) a charismatic and spiritual approach; or (3) a neofundamentalist stress on laws (shari'a) and rituals (ʿibādāt). He further asserts that the latter two of these “reject any theological or philosophical dimension in favour of devotion.” This formulation is an improvement over Western analyses, including sometimes his own, that paint contemporary Muslim intellectual and religious currents exclusively through a binary of we/not-we. This binary can be translated respectively as modernism and its corollaries, “fundamentalism” and Islamism; the former adapts Islamic norms to the West and Western modernity, while the latter, fundamentalism and Islamism, claim to reject modernity—while being its very product—and Western influence in favor of an Islamic paradigm. This paradigm can either be quietist—as in various forms of Salafism—or politically active—as in Islamism and its goal of an Islamic state.

Returning to his schematization above, one is struck by how he curtails the possibility of a Muslim accommodation to globalization that is theologically or philosophically oriented, unless it is liberal reformist. In other words, Roy seems to suggest that the only ways that Muslims can integrate globalization is through a privatization of their religious faith, either by focusing on ritual practices and following the shariʿa through a path of personal piety, a charismatic and spiritual approach to religion—perhaps through quietist forms of Sufism or Shiʿism—or through adopting Western liberal norms.

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14 Here, globalization serves as the latest representation of the modern West, a successor to notions such as civilization, progress, and modernity. It is also important to remember the central role of Western hegemony and its imperial arm, whether directly in the colonial era and more indirectly now, in constructing these discourses.
The analyses of Roy and other scholars suffer from a discourse about Islam in Western scholarship that predates them and which has been unable to present a viable picture of Muslim religious and intellectual currents in the colonial and post-colonial periods. There are several problems with this scholarship discussing Muslim figures, schools, and movements in the modern era. Due to its origin in the colonial era, it is indebted to several Eurocentric perspectives in its analysis of the Muslim world. A central problem is the notion of a decline of the Muslim world combined with modern Western notions of progress predicated on the inevitability of modern science and reason replacing religious worldviews. Until recently, the idea that religious discourses were soon to be consigned to the dustbin of history not only in the West but worldwide was widely held by analysts and scholars, including those working on the Muslim world. Although the resurgence of religious movements and discourses combined with the postmodernist critique of the modernist project has severely challenged such perceptions, the lacunae they left in the study of modern Islam due to such presumptions can still be keenly felt. These lacunae include the widespread neglect of those actors in the Muslim world who were representatives of tradition in its various forms, particularly the 'ulama’—religious scholars who in the later period were often connected to Sufi orders as well.

A central dimension of this scholarship is the aforementioned stress, in line with modernization and development theory and common to the historical method, on change over continuity. The neglect of elements of continuity and the accenting of elements of change has resulted in a picture of Muslim religious and intellectual life that suffers from a number of important omissions and misplaced emphases, distorting the salience of the multiplicity of perspectives that have continuously been contested and negotiated by Muslims in the modern period.
Political considerations in the West have further influenced which actors in Muslim societies are highlighted, with a focus on precisely those actors that can be most easily analyzed in an “us/them” equation. Western analyses have thus largely reduced the modern Islamic scene to a battle between the forces of modernism and various forms of fundamentalist, reformist, and reactionary movements. Another way of highlighting the imperial and neo-imperial background of these analyses is that the elitist notion of history they espouse in which the only players are Muslim modernists, who are directly influenced by Western ideas and sometimes indebted to Western interests, and their opponents, the fundamentalists, leaving the majority of Muslim views, and therefore the perspectives of most ordinary Muslims, out of the equation. It is my contention that the discourses of the ʿulamaʾ (and of Sufis) are highly influential among ordinary Muslims and by ignoring them, we ignore large segments of Muslim opinion and therefore, much of the intellectual landscape of modern Muslim societies. This is the case because the ʿulamaʾ are seen to represent tradition and thereby a direct link to the Prophetic heritage in a world of rapid change.

IV. The Concept and Pertinence of Tradition

The concept of “tradition”, in consonance with modern notions of linear progress and the developmental model popular in mid-twentieth century analyses, was long seen as exemplifying static and “medieval” discourses that added little to the debate on Islam in the modern world. For example, Olivier Roy, in an earlier work, stated: “The atemporality and of the mullahs’ and ulamas’ discourse is striking to this day. History is something to be endured; whatever is new is contingent and merits a fatwa from time to time.”17 While this may well be the perspective of some conservative religious scholars specializing in jurisprudence, the whole of the traditions

that the ‘ulama’ represent have been often cast in this way. Tradition and its guardians are necessarily seen in this perspective as irrelevant, outmoded, and out of touch with the workings of the modern world. In contradistinction, William Graham states that tradition is a central analytic category for the study of Islamic thought, whether past or present. Instead of viewing tradition as “some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism or rejection of change and challenge”, it should be seen as part of a belief that “a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially with model persons, offers the only sound basis . . . for forming and reforming one’s society in any age.”

A tradition, in this sense, to paraphrase Alasdair Macintyre’s views, is a cumulative intersubjective argument extended over time in a particular conceptual language that sets it apart from other traditions. To its adherents, it offers the language to continue to interpret and re-interpret their discourses as an ongoing process. Tradition has increasingly begun to be seen as a complex and dynamic category. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his perceptive discussion of cumulative tradition, states: “it is diverse, it is fluid, it grows, it changes, it accumulates.” Accordingly, literature on the self-identified keepers of “tradition” in the context of Islam such as the ‘ulama’ is beginning to increase. Rather than unchanging and irrelevant relics of the past, it is more helpful to view the discourses of tradition, as mediated by the ‘ulama’, as negotiating change and navigating modernity through a language and discourse that relies on precedence, and refers to distinctive historically transmitted

20 A useful discussion on how to approach the concept of tradition in Islamic studies, from which I have drawn insights in this section, is to be found in Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3-11.
discursive traditions and practices.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, tradition is not just another name for continuity. Rather, it is an intentional and creative engagement with discontinuity in order to harmonize and incorporate it into a framework of continuity. Tradition is thus both continuous and always new, since change is an unalterable dimension of the human condition. As Marilyn Waldman has written in a far-ranging examination of the concept of tradition and Islamic studies, tradition should be viewed as a modality of change and “as a process, rather than as a stage or type.”\textsuperscript{23}

V. Reconceptualizing the Muslim Intellectual Landscape in the Modern Period

As a point of departure, a more useful map of the Muslim intellectual and religious landscape than the dichotomous opposition of modernists and fundamentalists is offered by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He describes how the variety of Muslim religious and intellectual orientations in the modern period can be traced back to the initial Muslim responses to the new situation of loss of independence and Western domination under colonialism, which presented itself religiously as a crisis of cosmic proportions. He schematizes the responses as follows: (1) the millenarian, or more precisely Mahdist, response that saw these events as the coming of the end times and the imminent appearance of the Mahdi; (2) the revivalist response that saw it as due to Muslims straying from religion and therefore a call to the renewal of Islam in its “pure” form, which alone could ensure success. This response, though best represented by “fundamentalist” groups such as wahhabiyya and salafiyya, was also shared by a number of Sufi revivalisms; (3) the modernist response that argued that Islamic traditions had to be adopted to the modern conditions and argued for accommodation with the West; and (4) the traditional response, which focused on

\textsuperscript{22} Armando Salvatore offers a dense and complex argument for the contemporary utility of “tradition” in his \textit{The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, and Islam} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

continuing, intellectually and practically, the normative corpus of the Islamic tradition and can be identified largely with the ‘ulama’, the Sufis, and more recently, various Muslim intellectuals who consciously advocate a broad traditionalism over what they regard as the narrower visions of accommodationist modernist or rejectionist Wahhabi/Salafi orientations. Nasr further argues that these types, which can always be combined with one another, persist to the present largely because, though formal colonialism has ended, the encounter with the West—and continued domination by it—as well as the corresponding encounter with modernity continues to generate these possible responses. Out of these responses, it is the first three, and especially modernism and fundamentalism, which have received far more attention than the largely ignored traditional response. In this typology, Nānautvī would fall mainly within this last category as a representative of the ‘ulama’. Although the establishment and orientation of Deoband had elements of a revivalist type, Nānautvī seemed to have only minimally emphasized this dimension, as opposed to his friend and co-founder of the seminary, the far more reformist-minded Gangohī. Be that as it may, like other groups of ‘ulama’ in South Asia, the Deobandi ‘ulama’ were sidelined in earlier Western studies of Islam and in mainstream South Asian Muslim histories, being seen as obscurantist and relics of a bygone era.

As a complementary alternative to Nasr’s schema, one can also chart Muslim encounters with modernity through three modes, which shed more light on the complexity of modern Islam. One approach can be seen as that of legalistic or moral conservatism, which is focused on the social preservation of Islamic moral and legal normativity, and the identification of Islam with its moral, legal, and practical aspects. The attitude here can be succinctly described as saving what can be saved in the face of the overwhelming challenges of the modern world and, if need be,

relinquishing the rest. This results in a privatization of religion, since the modern nation-state in the Muslim world is decidedly built on modern European models and encourages the same kinds of differentiation of the spheres. José Casanova describes this move as a corollary of secularization:

The core and the central thesis of the theory of secularization is the conceptualization of the process of societal modernization as a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere.25

Zaman argues that this is the de facto position of much of the ‘ulama’ in contemporary South Asia, who lay claim to a separate religious sphere of which they are the specialists in order to maintain their relevance in the era of nation-states, instead of the much more expansive and public role of the ‘ulama’ in the pre-colonial era.26

A second major response to the modern context among Muslims has been activism, both social and especially political. This perspective posits an idealized and atavistic Islam as the alternative and opposition to the failure of modern institutions like the nation-state and the legal system, which breed corruption, injustice, moral decadence, and are mired in neo-imperialist projects. Despite this opposition to important aspects of modernity, many—though not all—Muslims of this persuasion are deeply shaped by the modern context and modern Western ideas. Their opposition is also far less about theory than action; the critique is not of the modern Western worldview or modern science and rationality, which are easily adopted by such Muslims, but the immediate political and social effects of rule by Westernized elites (or in the colonial era, by

26 Zaman, The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change, 83-86.
European colonial elites). Many contemporary Islamist groups fall in this category as well as many older groups that have been identified as fundamentalist or Islamist.27

A third approach has been that of intellectual engagement with the West and modernity, whether in the form of adoption, accommodation, or critique. This category includes both modernists who attempt to harmonize dimensions of the Islamic tradition with modern Western thought as well as traditionalist theologians and intellectuals who respond to the challenges of modern thought. Both these groups often utilize aspects of the Islamic philosophical and theological traditions in order to engage with modern Western intellectual traditions. For example, in the context of nineteenth-century South Asia, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān represents the first of these possibilities as someone committed to seeking an Islam completely in harmony with Victorian science and rationality but nonetheless relying not only on the Qur’anic and prophetic sources alone, but also on the work of Muslim theologians and philosophers to articulate his syntheses. Similarly, Nānautvī, and to a greater extent, his intellectual successor, Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī, critiqued modern Western scientism and rationalist philosophy28, again relying on the resources of the Islamic intellectual tradition to do so. An important element of this discourse, as we will see later in the work of Nānautvī, is that rationality is not a provenance of Europe alone but that alternative rational and philosophical traditions exist and are viable in addressing the challenges of the modern world. Furthermore, it serves as a vivid example of the creativity of tradition and how Islamic traditions engaged with modernity.

27 For an extensive discussion of this category see Bruce Lawrence, Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt Against the Modern World (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989).
The Making of Late Nineteenth-Century Revivalism: The Intellectual Trajectory of South Asian Islam in the Early Modern and Colonial Periods

The early seventeenth century marked a threshold for Muslim intellectual and religious life in South Asia. With the death of the last great Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, in 1707, the relative peace and stability that large numbers of Muslims had come to enjoy in South Asia rapidly gave way to a turbulent state of affairs, which were to change the cultural and political landscape and destiny of South Asian Muslims forever. The Mughal empire, overstretched by Aurangzeb, quickly unraveled at the hands of successive weak rulers with the most significant blow coming from the devastating invasion of North India by the Persian king Nādir Shāh through his legatee Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī. Many of our accounts of the period come from members of the higher class or from scholars and the literati, who bemoaned the terrible state that North India had fallen into; they were particularly hard hit by the situation due to their being part of, or benefiting from, the patronage of Muslims power that could no longer be relied upon.29 However, the rapid changes over the next century, especially those that came with the ascent of British power, were widespread enough to affect all South Asians.

A seemingly paradoxical result of the waning fortunes of Muslims and the decline of their ruling and aristocratic classes was the rise of the ‘ulama’ (as well as Sufi shuyūkh), or to use Francis Robinson’s apt phrase, “learned and holy men.”30 The pre-modern symbiosis between scholars and sultans had been shattered, and although this could have led to the decline of Islamic scholarship and piety in South Asia, it instead revitalized it. This happened as the ‘ulama’ and Sufis increasingly came to occupy the seat of authority—albeit a moral rather than political

29 For some accounts of these sentiments, see Annemarie Schimmel, Islam in the Indian Subcontinent (Leiden: Brill, 1990).
one—that was left by the vacuum of the loss of Muslim power, and they attempted to provide stability through religion in a time of crisis. This period thus became one of Muslim religious and intellectual resurgence. A number of major Suﬁ poets emerged in the Sindh31 and the Punjab and the Muslim literary vernaculars of these regions ﬂowered in this period. The Chishtī Niẓāmī Sufi order was revived by the Delhi Shaykh Kalīmullāh Jahānābādī (d. 1729). He was only one of many Suﬁ ﬁgures increasingly insisting on combining Suﬁ spiritual practice with adherence to the shari’a. Complementarily, many of the ‘ulama’ came to rely on Sufism as a source of guidance, as well as a means of providing moral authority. The Naqshbandiyya had already established itself as a revivalist order with the celebrated Aḥmad Sirhindī, founder of the Mujaddidī branch of the order, whose focus on a spiritual practice deeply rooted in the practice of Islamic law has been recently called “juristic Sufism”32, and whose inﬂuence was to increase in the nineteenth century as he was retroactively claimed as the inspiration for Muslim revivalisms of the era. Another very important but often overlooked Naqshbandī who was to shape South Asian Muslim religious life in the following centuries was ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Dihlawī (1551-1642), who revitalized the study of hadith in India. His initiatory efforts led to the ﬂourishing of the religious sciences in South Asia and their utilization in the construction of revivalist forms of Islam which increasingly stressed the Prophetic example as a means of establishing Muslim moral authority under colonial rule. It found a further ﬂourishing in eighteenth-century Delhi with the work of: the Mujaddidī Sufi, Mirzā Maẓhar Jān-i Jānān (1699-1781), who emphasized adherence to the Prophetic norm yet subscribed to a religious pluralism

31 The most celebrated of Sindhi Suﬁ poets seen as the founder of the Sindhi language is Shāh ʿAbd al-Latīf Bhittaī (1689-1752). See Annemarie Schimmel, Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century India (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 151-262.
that recognized Hindu traditions as divine revelation\textsuperscript{33}; the first Urdu Sufi poet, Mīr Dard (1721-1775)\textsuperscript{34}; and most importantly, Shāh Walī Allāh, the intellectual heir of the work of Sirhindī and ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq. Another very important school of ‘ulama’ was established at Lucknow by the Farangī Mahall family of ‘ulama’ who specialized in the rational sciences and combined this with the study of jurisprudence and Sufi practice.

I. Shāh Walī Allāh and his successors

The most significant example of this newfound role for Muslim scholars and intellectuals is to be seen in the Delhi polymath, Shāh Walī Allāh (1703-1762), who can be seen as both the culmination of the pre-modern trajectory of Islamic intellectual traditions in South Asia, as well as furnishing the basis for nearly every Sunni movement and orientation since. John Voll writes: “Wali Allah represents an important climax point for Indian Islam. On the one hand, his career was a high point in the evolution of Islam that had been set in motion by the rise of the Moghuls and the emergence of Naqshbandīyyah revivalism, and on the other hand his work provided the foundation for virtually every major Muslim movement in India since that time.”\textsuperscript{35} Even though every major Sunni movement in South Asia in modern times lays some kind of claim to the authority of Shāh Walī Allāh, the Deobandi movement of which Nānautvī was a part particularly emphasizes his legacy and historically stands in his lineage in an unbroken teacher-student lineage. Understanding Wali Allāh and his legacy is therefore crucial to understanding Nānautvī,


\textsuperscript{35} John Voll, \textit{Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World} (Syracuse; Syracuse University Press, 1994), 58.
both because of the scholarly lineage he hailed from and the debt to Walī Allāh’s rational explication of religion, as we shall see more closely in Chapter Two.

Since Walī Allāh’s life has been narrated in many sources, I will only briefly outline it here. Walī Allāh was born into an elite Muslim family at Delhi in 1703. He was the son of Shāh ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, a capable ʿālim and Sufi who had collaborated on the compilation of the imperial Fatāwā-i Ālamgīrī under Aurangzeb. Walī Allāh’s religious and spiritual education was largely at the hands of his father who trained him in the religious and intellectual sciences and also initiated him into Sufism. In 1731, he traveled to Hijaz and spent time in the company of a number of eminent scholars, most importantly Abū Ṭāhir al-Kurdfī. Upon his return to India roughly two years later, Walī Allāh continued to supervise the influential Madrasa Raḥīmiyya in Delhi founded by his father, taught and trained disciples, and produced a voluminous body of written works on a wide range of subjects: from Qur’anic studies to hadith—for which he was particularly renowned—to metaphysics and theology, to law and ethics. He died in 1762, leaving behind a coterie of students and disciples, which included his four sons, to carry forth his educational, religious, and intellectual legacy.

Perhaps Shāh Walī Allāh’s most significant achievement was the creation of a grand synthesis of the different major intellectual perspectives and schools that preceded him as well as the integration of the intellectual, religious, and spiritual sciences. In other words: revelation, reason,

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36 See for example, G. H. Jalbani, Life of Shah Waliullah (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1980) for a short introduction, S.A.A. Rizvi, Shāh Wali-Allah and His Times: a study of eighteenth century Islam, politics, and society in India (Canberra: Ma’rifat Publishing House, 1980) for a much more comprehensive study of Wali Allāh’s life and J.M.S. Baljon’s Religion and Thought of Shāh Wali Allāh ad-Dihlawī 1703-1762 (Leiden: Brill, 1986) for a disorganized but very useful introduction to the breadth of Wali Allāh’s thought. There are many works in Urdu on Wali Allāh’s life and thought as well, for example the volume by the renowned Indian scholar Sayyid Abu’l Hasan ‘Ali Nadvī in his multi-volume history of Islamic scholarship, Tarīkh Da’wat wa azīnāt (Karachi: Majlis-i Nashriyat-i Islam, 1981) vol. 5

and spirituality—or in terms of Islamic disciplines—Qur’an, hadith, and law; as well as philosophy, logic, and theology, on the one hand, and Sufi metaphysics, cosmology, and spiritual practice, on the other.\textsuperscript{38} Walī Allāh criticized the balkanization of the Islamic intellectual disciplines by groups recognizing only their own interpretive tools, whether in the religious sciences or in the rational or the mystical sciences. In response to this, he posited a new methodology, \textit{ṭāṭbīq}, meaning bringing into alignment and congruence, which looks beyond surface differences and seeks the inner essence or comprehensive principle (\textit{al-ra’y al-kullī}) so that a basis for agreement and reconciliation can be established.\textsuperscript{39} This process, \textit{ṭāṭbīq}, the harmonization and integration of conflicting or different perspectives and viewpoints, could be applied whether the disagreements are within a discipline, say between Ḥanafī and Shāfi‘ī schools of law, between the Sufi doctrines of unity of being (\textit{waḥdat al-wujūd}) and unity of consciousness (\textit{waḥdat al-shuhūd}), or between specific disciplines such as theology and philosophy, or law and Sufism. Coming at a late stage in Islamic history in South Asia, this synthesis was able to incorporate all the major intellectual and religious perspectives into a unity in the Sunni world, especially in its South Asian incarnation. Barbara Metcalf comments on Walī Allāh’s project:

His success, however, rested neither in curricular and institutional innovation nor in the compilation of mere commentaries, but in a major individual effort at intellectual synthesis and systemization, an unprecedented \textit{ṭāṭbīq} of the whole range of Islamic knowledge. Troubled by the disorder he saw around him, perhaps even sensing that he was at the end of an age, he sought to stem the tide of decline by consolidating and clarifying the entire body of the Islamic tradition.


Knowledge of the truth would bring Muslims to religious obedience that end the divisions and deviations he so greatly deplored.40

A second central strand in Walī Allāh’s perspective was his focus on the revitalization of Islamic religious life in South Asia at a time of crisis through a renewed focus on the religious sciences, particularly the Qur’an and hadith, an orientation that he had acquired particularly after his studies in the Hijaz. In this, he was not alone as various forms of Islamic revivalism emerged throughout Muslim lands in the eighteenth century due to the decline of Muslim power—partially due to the rise of the West, although it had not yet impacted Muslim lands extensively.41 Walī Allāh attempted to shift the paradigm for the impartation of religious knowledge so that it was not only for a small circle of Muslim religious elites but accessible to more Muslims is demonstrated by his celebrated translation of the Qur’an into Persian and his works trying to make the Qur’an and hadith more readily comprehensible to ordinary Muslims, not to mention his overall unified vision of the Islamic tradition that attempted to synthesize compartmentalized subjects into a unity. The trajectory that leads to the popularization of Islamic knowledge in the emergent public sphere by ‘ulama’ like Nānautvī in the nineteenth century begins with Walī Allāh’s efforts in making the Islamic disciplines more accessible to more Muslims, a process which was continued by his sons and disciples.

It is important to note that the culture typified by men like Shāh Walī Allāh and Mirzā Mażhar Jān-i Jānān and their successors was that of the ashrāf, the noble Muslim elites of North India

40 Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900, 36.
that traced their family lineages to the Prophet or his early companions, like Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān as opposed to the *ajlāf*, the descendants of local Indian converts. The particular emphases seen in Walī Allāh and his successors on the following of the Prophetic norm, on the increased rejection of local Indian customary practices, on renewed pride in foreign noble origins, and the eventual turn to a more Arabic-centered Islam, as opposed to the Persian-centered traditions that flourished in the pre-modern era cannot be disconnected from the self-identity of the *ashrāf* culture that was increasingly threatened with the breakdown of Muslim power. Similarly, a strong opposition to Shiʿism and the articulation of a strong Sunni identity is also closely linked with the specific *ashrāf* culture of Delhi and its surrounding areas. Walī Allāh and his successors’ attempts at the popularization of foundational Islamic traditions at a time of crisis can also be seen as a case of hastening what Dominique Sila-Khan has called “ashrafization,” a process also seen in other Indian religious traditions in the early modern and modern periods in which the religious traditions of the elite are increasingly co-opted by more locally-rooted religious traditions; in other words, the localized traditions of the *ajlāf* increasingly adopt the rhetoric and practices of the universal Muslim traditions of the *ashrāf*.

As Walī Allāh was claimed by almost every major Muslim movement in the post-1857 period, the intellectual milieu of Nānautvī can be examined through tracing the many distinct interpretations of Walī Allāh’s legacy in the century after his death. The first intellectual heirs of Shāh Walī Allāh were his four sons as well as his disciples and students, of whom two of the most famous are Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791) and Qāzī Thānaullāh Pānipatī (d. 1810). The main Walī Allāhī tradition was disseminated through his sons, each of whom is supposed to have

specialized in one dimension of Walī Allāh’s synthesis- the religious, the rational, and the spiritual sciences. The most important of his sons was Shāh ‘Abd al-Azīz (1746-1824), a muḥaddith like his father, who presided over the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya and came to wield great influence at a time of political and social disintegration that gave the ‘ulama’ hitherto unprecedented moral and social authority over the Muslim community of India.\(^{43}\) Shāh ‘Abd al-Azīz’s influence in the subcontinent is almost as widespread as that of Shāh Walī Allāh himself, and scholars all various orientations in Indian Islam studied with him. This influence can be seen, for example, in the fact that Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d. 1861), leader of the rival school of Khayrabād and chief exponent of philosophy and the intellectual sciences (maʿqūlāt), was also a student of Shāh ‘Abd al-Azīz. It can also be seen in the singular significance given to him by the populist Sufi Barelvī movement, which considered him the mujaddid, reviver, of the thirteenth-Islamic century. He was also the author of a widely-used collection of fatāwā, a genre which became increasingly popular, compiled from the questions of ordinary Muslims trying to function in a society they perceived to be less and less governed by Islamic social and legal norms. Two of Walī Allāh’s sons, following in the footsteps of their father’s translation of the Qur’an into Persian, Shāh ‘Abd al-Qādir (1753-1827) and Shāh Rafīʿ ad-Dīn (1749-1817) produced the first translations of the Qur’an into Urdu, the former in a idiomatic fashion and the latter in a literal one, indicating the propensity the Walī Allāhī tradition had for adaptation to changing intellectual and social conditions. The Madrasa Raḥīmiyya remained a center of Walī Allāhī teaching under ‘Abd al-Azīz and his successors, and a center of intellectual and religious life in Delhi. However, a number of important members of the Walī Allāhī school chose exile in

Hijaz in light of the worsening situation in India. The British razed the Madrasa in retaliation to the 1857 uprising in which some of the ‘ulama’ played an important role. Thus ended the central institutional pathway in which the teachings of Walī Allāh were interpreted and disseminated.

The legacy of Walī Allāh continued, however, to be a source of inspiration and guidance through a number of other channels, which bring us directly to the immediate influences and teachers of Nānautvī. These two quite different channels, which demonstrate the breadth of Walī Allāh’s vision, were: (1) The reform and jihad movement of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī (d. 1831) and his associate, Walī Allāh’s grandson, Shāh Ismāʿīl (d. 1831). (2) The figure of Mamlūk ‘Alī (d. 1850), the principal teacher who worked at Delhi College established by the British, whose pedagogy proved deeply influential to the succeeding generation of Muslims scholars and intellectuals. There were other ways in which Walī Allāh’s legacy was transmitted, but these are the two that lead directly to the career of Nānautvī and his collaborator Gangohī and the founding of the school and scholarly orientation (maslak) of Deoband. Therefore, we will concentrate on them.

Witnessing the chaotic turn of events with Muslim power giving way to the British, the Marathas, and the Sikhs in different parts of India in the early nineteenth century, Shāh ʿAbd al-Azīz had given his notorious fatwa that North India had ceased to be dār al-islām (the abode of peace) and had become dār al-ḥarb (the abode of war) citing specifically the power of the British. The British had, indeed, gone from being represented by a trading company, the East India Company, vying for privileges from Muslim nobles in the early seventeenth century to being the undisputed masters of North India, especially after 1803, when they occupied Delhi and the Mughal kingship continued only in name. Although there is some ambiguity about this

44 This includes even the successor to Shāh ʿAbd al-Azīz at the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya, Shāh Muḥammad Iṣḥāq (d. 1846), a grandson of Shāh Walī Allāh.
the fatwa because ʿAbd al-Azīz also allowed employment under the British and did in no way encourage war,\textsuperscript{45} the fatwa can be seen as representative of the perceptions of North Indian Muslims towards their new socio-political and economic context in which they were no longer in control of their own affairs.

II. Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī and his Reformist Movement

There was one man, however, in the coterie of ʿAbd al-Azīz who took the implications of the new situation of the Muslims in north India along more radical lines, emphasizing a wholesale reform of Muslim religious life in South Asia along with the taking up of arms in jihad. This man was the charismatic Sayyid Aḥmad of Rae Bareilī, a student and spiritual disciple whom ʿAbd al-Azīz initiated into the Sufī path, and who turned away from the scholarly paradigm of his teacher to a more active and messianic approach so as to revive the fortunes of the Muslims of India.\textsuperscript{46} Sayyid Aḥmad’s movement is the first major example in South Asia of the messianist response to the rise of modernity and the West using Nasr’s paradigm described earlier. Metcalf states: “His was to be nothing less than one of the genuinely utopian movements of modern India, in this case seeking not to withdraw as an exclusive sect but to destroy society itself and build it anew on a just and egalitarian basis.”\textsuperscript{47} To build such a society, Sayyid Aḥmad began with an extensive reformist project that sought to revitalize religious and spiritual life through a thorough critique of Muslim religious practices. This critique was aimed at the three sources that removed Muslims from the path of the Prophet, the \textit{Ṭarīqa-i Muḥammadiyya}, which was how Sayyid Aḥmad’s movement referred to itself: erroneous Sufi practices, Shiʿi influences, and popular

\textsuperscript{46} See Mohiuddin Ahmad, \textit{Sayyid Ahmad Shahid: His Life and Mission} (Lucknow: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1975) and Nadvi, \textit{Tarikh-i Da’wat-o Aẓīmat} Vol. 6 (Karachi: Majlis-i Nashriyat-i Islam, 1981.), parts 1 and 2.
\textsuperscript{47} Metcalf, \textit{Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900}, 52.
custom. The movement was thus specifically concerned with overhauling the religious and social practices of North Indian Muslims. And despite its criticism of popular Sufism, it was organized like a Sufi order itself, greatly drew inspiration from Sufi spirituality and ethics, and was itself rooted in Sufi lineages.

Sayyid Aḥmad attracted the learned scion of the Walī Allāh family, Shāh Ismāʿīl, to become his disciple and collaborator and it was Ismāʿīl who penned the first and most influential South Asian reformist treatises under his influence, the *Sirāṭ al-Mustaqīm* in Persian and *Taqwiyāt al-Imān* in Urdu, the first attributed to Sayyid Aḥmad himself, and the second a very controversial work of Ismāʿīl. Much of the content of these treatises is a condemnation of popular practices, whether of Sufi, Shiʿi, or Hindu origin, which threaten the basic tenets of *tawḥīd*, God’s unity, and following of the Prophet’s Sunnah, and exhortations that they should be abandoned as they are conduits for *shirk* (associationism), and *bidʿā* (innovation). It is clear, then, why the movement was referred to as Wahhabi by the British as it shared these characteristics, although little else, with the earlier Arabian movement of Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, which virulently rejected Sufism in all forms. Sayyid Aḥmad, along with Shah Ismāʿīl travelled all over North India calling Muslims to turn away from erroneous practices and heedlessness, and harkened to the way of the Prophet and the call of God. The significance of this campaign, which started off as preaching and eventually turned to a jihad against the Sikh in the North Western Frontier provinces, cannot be overemphasized for the subsequent history of Muslims in North India as it demonstrated the power of an activist path based on direct access to God, instead of relying on intermediaries as was common for Indian Muslim practice, and an emphasis not on the spiritual power or intercession of the Prophet but on the following of his personal wont,

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48 This attribution can be most famously seen in William Hunter’s influential *Indian Musulmans: Are they bound in conscience to rebel against the Queen?* (London: Trubner and Company, 1872).
which was the ideal mold for righteous action conformed to the will of God. Sayyid Aḥmad’s and Shah Ismāʿīl’s martyrdom at the hands of the Sikhs in 1831 only further cemented the legend. Sayyid Aḥmad’s idealism would be a singular source of inspiration for many Muslim scholars and movements in South Asia in the century after his death, leading many to adopt an activist stance towards the revival of Islamic life and Muslim fortunes in South Asia. Sayyid Aḥmad’s path was the first to radically respond to modernity by charting a new path for South Asian Muslims instead of reliance on the classical tradition of the ‘ulama’ and mainstream Sufi orders.

III. Mamlūk ʿAlī and Delhi College

While there is much recognition of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī and his movement both in Western scholarship and among South Asian ‘ulama’ and historians, much less attention has been paid to another significant player in the making of the late nineteenth-century intellectual Muslim milieu that laid the groundwork for Muslim intellectual life in South Asia which persists to this day. This is the role played by Mamlūk ʿAlī and the Anglo-Indian Delhi College, which introduced Muslim elites to new methodologies and allowed for the selective adoption of specific modern ideas and practices while maintaining—in greater or smaller measure—a link to classical traditions of Muslim scholarship. British missionary and writer on old Delhi, C.F. Andrews credited the college with being a hallmark of the “Delhi Renaissance” due to its bringing together of the Western and the Eastern, of the old and the new. The far-reaching influence of Delhi College and more specifically its head teacher, Mamlūk ʿAlī is demonstrated by the fact that he was teacher of both Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, the founder of Muslim modernism in South

Asia, and his chief intellectual opponent, Nānautvī, among the founders of modern Muslim traditionalism in South Asia.

Delhi College was established at a turning point in the relationship between the British and the Indians and more specifically, between Western and Oriental learning—with “Oriental” designating specifically Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian languages and literatures—and interestingly, became “a crucial, mediating institution”\textsuperscript{50} for both South Asians and the British. In Britain and the British Indian administration, the debate between the Orientalists—those that wanted to preserve South Asian traditions of learning and knowledge—and Anglicists—whether liberal or evangelical Christian, who wanted to replace them with modern Western learning and knowledge—had been raging in the early eighteenth century. After 1813, there was a revision of the charter of the East India Company, which included the allocation for educational funding. With this, the agenda of the Anglicists, who wanted to introduce Western learning to India, began to gain success. But the tension between the two opposing groups continued to play out for a couple more decades. The Delhi College was established by the British with the cooperation of Muslim nobles and scholars in 1825 on the site of an existing madrasa and its innovation was that it had two departments, one dedicated to oriental learning and the other to Western learning:

Roughly defined, the oriental curriculum involved the study of the classical languages of India: Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, and the texts and branches of knowledge associated with their literatures and religions. The western curriculum at that time was a humanistic one, in transition from its own classical and clerical past, toward a greater emphasis on science. It included grammar and composition in modern languages (though Latin and Greek had not yet been dethroned in

\textsuperscript{50} Gail Minault, “The Delhi College and Urdu,” \textit{The Annual of Urdu Studies} 14 (1999): 120.
Europe), readings in history, philosophy, and such sciences as “natural philosophy,” various branches of mathematics, and astronomy.\textsuperscript{51}

This juxtaposition of traditional Muslim and Western learning in one institution was the first of its kind for South Asian Muslims and became a “model for ʿulamaʾ who later turned their efforts to strengthening the organization of religious education.”\textsuperscript{52} In addition to providing its Muslim students with their first exposure to modern Western knowledge, it also introduced an Orientalist methodology to approaching Islamic disciplines themselves that had implications not only for the modernizing Muslims but for some of the ʿulamaʾ of North India themselves. These implications include the reassertion of a classical Muslim canon or heritage, the introduction of new historical and philological methods, and an emphasis on the rational sciences, as the oriental subjects were largely weighed towards these rather than the religious sciences. Delhi College also became the site for the interaction between some of the ʿulamaʾ and British Orientalists such as the well-known Austrian Orientalist Aloys Sprenger, who became principal of the college in 1845. These interactions were not limited to only those few Muslim scholars who taught at Delhi College but the larger Muslim intellectual community of Delhi.

Most significantly, Delhi College came to play an important role in the emergence of Urdu as the principal intellectual language of modern South Asian Muslims. As we have seen, the first Urdu translations of the Qurʾan by Shāh Walī Allāh’s sons were already an indication of the popularization of Urdu and the emergence of Urdu as a language of Muslim intellectual discourse at a time of crisis. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Urdu came to be established not only as “a language of courtly poetry—that had already happened—but also as a language of prose, for the persuasion of religious followers, for the molding of public opinion,

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{52} Metcalf, \textit{Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900}, 72.
and for the transmission of knowledge.” The role of the Delhi College in this was twofold: one, it used Urdu as its medium of instruction; and two, in order to do this, it needed to authorize a large number of translations into Urdu of Western, as well as classical, Muslim texts. Thus, the Delhi College both helped establish Urdu as the language of the North Indian Muslim intellectual elite and helped create a whole new intellectual discourse in Urdu by its translation activities. This was a primary step in the use of Urdu by Muslims in the emerging public sphere to construct new ways of understanding and presenting Islam in modern South Asia, as we shall further explore in the case of Nānautvī.

Originally from Nanautah, Mamlūk ʿAlī was the head instructor (mir maulvī) for Arabic at Delhi College and was recognized as a remarkable scholar by his contemporaries. One of his most famous students, the father of Muslim modernism in South Asia, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān wrote eloquently of him in his history of the North Indian Muslim elite, Āthār al-Ṣanādīd:

“Maulvi Mamlūk ʿAlī, student of Rashīd ad-Dīn Khān, possessed such mastery of the intellectual and transmitted sciences and of textbooks that if the world was emptied of these books, they could be reproduced through his mind.” It is noticeable here that Khān mentioned that Mamlūk ʿAlī was a student of Rashīd ad-Dīn Khān. It is this connection that puts him squarely in the line of Shāh Walī Allāh. Rashīd ad-Dīn was a close student of the great Shāh ʿAbd al-Azīz as well as his brothers, specifically Shāh Rağī ad-Dīn, who among the sons of Shāh Walī Allāh was most given to the rational sciences. He studied all the transmitted and rational sciences with Rağī ad-Dīn. Rashīd ad-Dīn was also the head of the Arabic department at Delhi College before his

53 Minault, “The Delhi College and Urdu”, 120.
54 The only full-length work on the life and work of Mamlūk ʿAlī is Nūr al-Ḥasan Rashīd Kandhalvī’s recent Dīhlī Kālij kay ṣadr mudarris awr rūḥ-o-rawān Ustādh al-Kull Hazrat Mawlānā Mamlūk ʿAlī Nānautvī (Kandhala, 2009), a masterful study of the man.
55 Sayyid Ahmad Khān, Āthār al-Ṣanādīd, 578.
56 Manāẓir Aḥṣan Gilānī, Sawāniḥ-i Qāsimī, (Lahore, n.d.), 93.
student Mamlūk ʿAlī inherited the position in 1833. Rashīd ad-Dīn is known for some of his written works but is best remembered for his students who were to play a major role in the new religious and intellectual movements of Indian Muslims of the late nineteenth century. It was his legacy that connected the new religious and intellectual developments with the school of Shāh Wālī Allāh, largely through the agency of Mamlūk ʿAlī, to whom he extensively transmitted his learning with the sons of Wālī Allāh. Mamlūk ʿAlī became a master of the rational sciences but his main allegiance was to the teachings of Wālī Allāh and the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya. It was on account of this that he attracted disciples such as Nānautvī, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Gangohī, the modernizing reformist and father of the Urdu novel, Nazīr Aḥmad, and the great hadith scholar, Aḥmad ʿAlī Sahranpūrī, all men who were to reshape the intellectual and religious landscape of South Asian Islam. After his appointment at Delhi College, he continued to teach students privately as well so not all these aforementioned scholars were taught at Delhi College but were no doubt influenced by its methods and participated in the new intellectual milieu it created. Mamlūk ʿAlī is not known for his written works, which include translations of classical works from the Arabic such as that of Euclid but also hadith and historical works; rather he is remembered as an exemplary teacher. He was among the first of the North Indian Muslim elite to become thoroughly acquainted with the “new learning,” as it was termed in Urdu, of the English. Among the aspects of his teaching that relied on a methodology current in Delhi College instead of traditional madrasas is an increased reliance on primary texts instead of commentaries and super-commentaries which had become the norm in the later pre-modern period. This focus on primary texts coincided with the rise of Urdu and the translation movement that flourished in Delhi College which began the process of creating a new canon of classical Islamic texts in Urdu

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57 For further discussion of this, see Gilānī, 239 and John Walbridge, *The Caliphate of Reason* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, 2004).
that eventually supplanted the texts of the traditional madrasa curricula in the new Muslim imaginary of the public sphere. Mamlūk ʿAlī’s engagement with Western learning was primarily through translation of Western works into Urdu and his biographers depict him as a new kind of scholar who was averse to the ways of the ordinary “maulvi” or religious scholar and preacher.58

On his role in bringing together the older Walī Allāhī tradition with the new institutional experiment of Delhi College, Margrit Pernau writes:

Mamluk ʿAli therefore constituted an important bridge between traditions. He had himself been educated in the ustad-shagird (master-disciple) tradition, but he held an office at a college where institutional identity was supposed to outweigh personal relationships; and so he used his personality rather than position to draw students. He taught them the traditional scholarship, but in a manner that enabled them to go new ways when their turn came.59

Manāẓir Aḥsan Gīlānī, an important early twentieth-century religious scholar and author of the definitive biography of Nānautvī, Sawāniḥ-i Qāsimī, largely focuses on three figures in the first part of this work who shaped the intellectual and spiritual milieu of Nānautvī. The first of these was Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī, whose preaching in the Doab area and visit to Nanautah inspired the elite Sunni families of these areas to turn to reformist Islam in the immediate years before Nānautvī was born. Gīlānī stresses how the environment of Nanautah and the Doab had been greatly affected by the rise of Shiʿism in Awadh and its influence had taken the Shaykhs and other elite Muslim families away from the Sunni traditions of their ancestors to a hodge-podge of Shiʿi practices mixed with local Indian and popular Sufī customs. Sayyid Aḥmad’s main contribution in this narrative was to return the Sunnis of these areas to the path of the Prophet and motivate them towards an activist stance towards religion. The second significant figure for

58 Gīlānī, Sawāniḥ-i Qāsimī, 107-8.
Gilānī was Mamlūk ʿAlī, who by traveling from Nanautah to study in the intellectual center of Delhi, established a way for others to study in Delhi and eventually come back to the townships of the Doab and establish their own educational institutions and intellectual and reformist activities. He himself attracted many students who came to study with him and who were able to study with the other great scholars and Sufis of Delhi such as ʿAbd al-Ghanī Naqshbandī, the successor of Ghulām ʿAlī Naqshbandī, the influential successor of Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān. Nānautvī himself was one such student who was attracted to Delhi because of the presence of Mamlūk ʿAlī, his uncle, and whose teacher in hadith was ʿAbd al-Ghanī. Mamlūk ʿAlī is described byGilānī as the “Wālī Allāhī mind” at the beginning of the thirteenth Islamic century, because of his training at the hands of the Wālī Allāhī family, his mastery of the rational and religious sciences, and his commitment to the revivalist path, although he was not an activist nor styled himself as a maulvi, i.e., a conventional ʿālim. The person Gilānī described as the “Wālī Allāhī heart,” the great Chishtī Sābirī shaykh, Hājjī Ḥāfīẓ Allāh (1817-1899), is the third major figure for Gilānī.

Hājjī Ḥāfīẓ Allāh Muhājir Makkī awr unkay khulufā’ Hājjī Ḥāfīẓ Allāh and His Successors (Karachi, 1997).

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60 For an excellent overview of the Naqshbandī tradition in India, including the successors of Mirzā Mazhar, see Hamid Algar, “A Brief History of the Naqshbandī Order,” in M. Gaborieau et al., eds., Naqshabandis: Historical Developments and Present Situation of a Muslim Mystical Order (Istanbul, 1990): 9-49. Ghulām ʿAlī was very influential in the Ottoman Empire due to his disciple Shaykh Khālid Baghdādī, who spread the Naqshbandī Mujaddidi order there and agitated against Westernization.

61 Gilānī, Sawāniḥ-i Qāsimī, 109.

62 There is surprisingly little scholarship on the life and teachings of Ḥāfīẓ Allāh. For an introduction, see Scott Kugle, Sufis and Saints’ Bodies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Ch. 5, which discuss a manual of inner life and meditation penned by Ḥāfīẓ Allāh, Dīvāʾ al-qulūb, and Ḥāfīẓ Qārī Fuyūḍ al-Raḥmān, Ḥājī Ḥāfīẓ Allāh Muhājir Makkī awr unkay khulufā’ [Ḥājī Ḥāfīẓ Allāh and His Successors] (Karachi, 1997).
“What is the meaning of being an ṣālim? God has made his pure soul a maker of scholars (ʿālimgar)”\textsuperscript{63} However, Imdād Allāh had been associated with and taken initiation from Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī, which was perhaps another reason the ʿulama’ were attracted to him. After the Uprising of 1857, in which he is said by later hagiographers to have taken a part, he migrated to Makkah, hence his epithet Muhājir Makkī, and was known for his discourses on the Mathnawi of Maulāna Rumi at the Ḥaram Sharīf. Imdād Allāh was the spiritual master of both Ṣanā’ī and Gangohī as well as later Deobandi figures such as Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī (d. 1943). It was at his suggestion that the madrasa at Deoband was founded in order to replace the Madrasa Rahīmiyya which had been destroyed by the British after the Uprising. Due to his focus on spiritual cultivation and his much less rigorous perspective on popular Sufi practices than the revivalist ʿulama’, groups of many different persuasions, even those opposed to each other, acknowledged him as a major Sufi teacher. On the other hand, some of his own close students such as Gangohī critiqued him as being too lenient on practices that Gangohī as a jurist had deemed to be shirk or bidʿa.\textsuperscript{64} Imdād Allāh was also the key figure in the modern revival of the Chishtī Sābirī order, a more sober and intellectual branch of the eponymous order than the better known Nizāmī branch.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{63} Shaikh Muhammad Ikram, Mawj-i Kawthar (Rawalpindi, 2004), 138.
\textsuperscript{64} See Brannon Ingram, “Sufis, Scholars, and Scapegoats: Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905) and the Deobandi Critique of Sufism,” Muslim World 99:3 (July 2009): 491-95.
\textsuperscript{65} For more on the Chishti Sābirī order and its modern revival, see Bruce B. Lawrence and Carl Ernst, Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) and Robert Thomas Rozehnal, Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in Twenty-First Century Pakistan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī in Scholarship

This is the first full-length study on Nānautvī in a Western language; generally, the literature on him is very sparse. There are important studies that examine his intellectual milieu, particularly the school of Deoband and its intellectual history and subsequent influence. The work of historian Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900*, is a masterful introduction to the school, its background, and its founding figures, including Nānautvī, which navigates the milieu largely through the genre of *tazkirāt*, later biographical and hagiographical accounts written from within the Deobandi perspective. Although there is no separate chapter on Nānautvī, many incidents from his life and activities are narrated and analyzed by Metcalf. Overall, Metcalf presents Nānautvī as an exemplary model of the Deobandi normative stance of combining law and spirituality, being both rooted in the religious sciences and in Sufism. She also highlights his role as a polemical debater against Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalists, viewing these debates principally as spectacle rather than serious theological exercises. Her treatment of early Deobandis is compelling and based on first-hand reports but it relies almost exclusively on what others have said about Nānautvī and not on his own works. This is understandable as Metcalf is writing as a historian and Nānautvī’s works are broadly in the field of theology. But it nonetheless paints a picture of Nānautvī that is not fully cognizant of the complexity of the roles Nānautvī played in the modern South Asian intellectual milieu. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, a more recent scholar who has written widely on the school of Deoband, critiques Metcalf for her portrayal of Deobandi scholars as committed to “an inward turn” in which they withdraw from public life to focus on inward reform. He argues in response that Deobandi scholars have been increasingly engaged with public life and the state and Metcalf’s analysis obscures this. While Zaman is correct to point out the significance of public
participation for Deobandi scholars, he writes as a political scientist and focuses almost exclusively on issues of jurisprudence that in turn, underrepresents the significance of theological, rational, and Sufi traditions for the Deobandi ‘ulama’, as if they precluded participation in public discourse. Especially for the early Deobandi tradition, it was precisely the cultivation of inward reform that constituted the practice necessary to enable outward reform in society and the two played a mutually enhancing role. Nevertheless, Zaman’s work has highlighted the very active role the ‘ulama’ in general, and Deobandi ‘ulama’ in particular, have played in Muslim South Asia in the public sphere and how their scholarly activities have supported their public agendas. Zaman has not written specifically on Nānautvī, however, and this might be due to the latter’s theological corpus as Zaman’s focus is often on the juridical tradition and its relation to the state. Thus, both Metcalf’s faithfulness to the self-understanding of Deobandis and Zaman’s investigations into their public roles are important aids in understanding the work and significance of Nānautvī. However, Metcalf’s historical and biographical emphasis and Zaman’s focus on the legal dimensions of Deobandi scholars has left out of its analysis the theological and intellectual dimensions of Nānautvī and it is this that I will be mainly addressing in this study.

There is more available on Nānautvī in South Asian languages, specifically Urdu, but this again is mostly of a biographical, historiographical, or polemical nature and seldom addresses the written works of Nānautvī. Nonetheless, much of this literature is valuable in giving us an overview of the reception history of Nānautvī. The first biography of Nānautvī was a first-person

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66 For a further analysis of this, see Fuad S. Naeem, “Sufism and Revivalism in South Asia: Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī of Deoband and Mawlānā Ahmad Razā Khān of Bareilly and their paradigms of Islamic revivalism,” Muslim World 99:3 (July 2009): 435-51.

67 Recently, Sherali Tareen has written specifically on Nānautvī in the context of particular interreligious polemics he engaged in: “The Polemic of Shahjahanpur: Religion, Miracles, and History,” Islamic Studies 51:1 (2012) 49-67. I will examine more closely Tareen’s arguments further in Ch. 4.
reflection written by Muḥammad Yaʿqūb Nānautvī, the son of Mamlūk ʿAlī and one of the early luminaries of Deoband. This short memoir, which focused on Muḥammad Qāsim’s exemplary life and did not deal with him intellectually, was included in the principal biography of Nānautvī, the aforementioned Sawānīh-i Qāsimī written by Manāzir Aḥsan Gīlānī, a scholar who was educated at Deoband but is best known for his voluminous research and scholarly work on myriad Islamic subjects which combined his traditional training with modern historical and philological methods. He spent twenty-five years as head of the religious studies department at the celebrated Osmania University in Hyderabad, which was founded in 1918 as the first Indian university to teach all subjects in Urdu. His biography of Nānautvī, in keeping with his traditional training as well as his experience with modern research, functions both as a hagiography that celebrates its subject as a kind of renewer of the Islamic tradition, and a biography that seeks to establish the particularities of his life and work. This was the last written work of Gīlānī and unfortunately, he passed away without completing the last part, which purportedly would have dealt with Nānautvī’s works and intellectual legacy. As it stands, Gīlānī’s work is a detailed and sometimes arcane investigation into the life of Nānautvī with much time spent on establishing his social and religious milieu. The only other major volume on Nānautvī’s life or work is the recent work by Nūr al-Ḥasan Kandhalvī, who has also penned a volume on Mamlūk ʿAlī, entitled Qāsim al-ʿUlūm: Haẓrat Mawlānā Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī68, which is perhaps best described as a work of miscellanea related to Nānautvī, as it aims to fill the gaps in his biography and printed works by collecting and translating: various letters by him on diverse subjects; various anecdotes about him by scholars; an overview of his life with copious annotation by Muhammad Ṭayyib, the Deobandi scholar who we will look at in

68 Nūr al-Ḥasan Rashīd Kandhalvī, Qasim al-ʿUlūm: Haẓrat Mawlānā Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī (Kandhala, India, 2000).
the next chapter and who the was most important exponent of Nānautvī’s ideas in recent times; some short unpublished treatises; and lists of his printed works and their various editions. There are, of course, many other works mainly devoted to chronicling the ‘ulama’ of Deoband that devote chapters to Nānautvī but these have little to add to the work of Gīlānī and Thānvī, who did not write on Nānautvī specifically but narrated many stories as well as intellectual perspectives attributed to Nānautvī throughout his voluminous works. An exception where a chapter, one of the lengthiest in the work, is devoted to Nānautvī is his widely read Arwāh-i Thalatha,69 a collection of spiritually edifying incidents and their deeper meanings from the lives of Shāh Walī Allāh and his intellectual descendants, including the major Deobandi ‘ulama’. Here, however, Nānautvī is represented through various incidents in his life which demonstrate his spiritual temperament, virtue, sanctity, and even the occasional miracle. As Nānautvī’s deep Sufi devotion and practice is not well represented in his own works, this serves as an introduction to him as a Sufi sage.

Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī: A Short Biography

Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī was born in the village of Nānautah near Saharanpur in a relatively well-to-do family of Siddiqi70 Shaykhs who had longstanding ties to the Delhi ‘ulama’ in 1832. He received his primary education in his hometown and then in the town of Deoband, where he was sent by his father fearing for his safety after family disputes erupted that led to the killing of Tafazzul Husain, who had converted to Shi`ism, demonstrating the developing sectarian milieu

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69 Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī, Arwāh-i Thalathah- ya’ni ḥikayat-i awliya (Karachi, n.d.).
70 Siddiqi denotes descent from Abu Bakr, the first caliph, who was known as al-Siddīq, the sincere. Surnames that denote descent from the major companions such as Farūqī or ‘Uṯmānī are still common among the South Asian Sunni ‘ulama’.
of the Doab region. After studying Arabic further in Saharanpur, Nānautvī accompanied his uncle, Mamlūk ʿAlī, to Delhi in 1844 for a full course of study in the Islamic disciplines. He stayed in Delhi for five or six years, mostly studying privately with Mamlūk ʿAlī although it seems he did enroll at Delhi College for a period without matriculating from there. He mastered the rational sciences with Mamlūk ʿAlī and further studied on his own major works of scholastic theology, logic, and philosophy. He studied the transmitted sciences, specifically hadith with ‘Abd al-Ghanī Naqshbandī and Aḥmad ʿAlī Saharanpuri, both among the pre-eminent hadith scholars of North India. In Delhi, he met Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī, who was also studying with Mamlūk ʿAlī, and with whom Nānautvī developed a lifelong friendship and a scholarly and spiritually collaborative relationship. Nānautvī’s experience in Delhi brought him into contact with a diverse array of intellectual currents and educational models, which would inform him in his founding of and articulating the educational methodology of Deoband in 1867 and in his debates and apologetics.

Alongside his academic education, Nānautvī, alongside his friend Gangohī, took initiation into the Sābirī Chishtī order from Hājjī Imdād Allāh. His biographers depict Nānautvī as an exceptionally humble and ascetical man given to lengthy practice of Sufī disciplines with little regard for his clothes or comfort. In later years, Imdād Allāh appointed Qāsim as one of his khulafā’, spiritual successors, and he began to attract a small but devoted coterie of disciples whom he guided on the Sufī path. Stories narrate that due to his love of seclusion and humility, he would often try to persuade would-be disciples to seek Gangohī instead, who as another khalīfa of Imdād Allāh, had established himself as a major Sufī guide with a large following. That there was tension between his life as a Sufī and his role as one of the ʿulama’ is indicated by the following somewhat humorous saying attributed to him: “Among the ʿulama’ I have a bad
name and among the Sufis I have the stain of maulviyyat.\footnote{Thānvī, Arwāh-i Thalathah- ya'ni hikayat-i awliya, 230-31.} This combination of religious scholar and Sufi is also seen in his founding of Deoband, which soon became the premier school for the training of ‘ulama’ in South Asia, at the behest of his Sufi master.

Nānautvī’s participation in the emerging public sphere is first seen after he completed his education and stayed at Delhi, taking employment in the Maṭbaʿ Aḥmadī, a pioneering printing press established to publish the works of Shāh Walī Allāh and his sons, as well as works of hadith. He would continue to work in various printing presses until the end of his life and this would be his primary occupation. He would often teach students as well, but mostly privately and not in a madrasa setting. Even at Deoband, he mainly served administrative roles and did not regularly teach despite being requested to. His principal domicile continued to be Delhi with some years spent at Meeruth, where he also worked at a printing press, as well as travels to various towns in India such as Shahjahanpur and Roorkee for the purpose of debates with Christian missionaries and Arya Samajists, which will be detailed in Ch. 3. He also travelled twice to Makkah to make the Hajj pilgrimage and visit his Shaykh, who had migrated to Makkah after the events of 1857. After a protracted illness, during which he continued to participate in religious debates, he died in 1880 at the age of 49.

Nānautvī’s own participation in the events of 1857 is disputed. Later accounts of the early Deobandis written during the Indian Independence movement seem to exaggerate their participation in the fight against the British. These accounts suggest that Imdād Allāh, along with Nānautvī and Gangohī played key roles in battling British troops in Thana Bhavan, Imdād Allāh’s home town. Gangohī was arrested but soon released and Nānautvī was never arrested or charged, suggesting that their role might have been exaggerated by later commentators perhaps
due to the influence of the maverick Deobandi scholar ʿUbayd Allāh Sindhī, who being influenced by socialist thought while in exile in Soviet Russia, anachronistically reread the whole Walī Allāḥī movement as a kind of anti-imperialist proto-socialist political movement.

Nānautvī’s Works:

Little of Nānautvī’s intellectual output was published in his own lifetime. Much of the writings that we do have from him originated as letters, as written accounts of debates, and as replies to questions and contentions, that were then published, often with titles not given by Nānautvī himself but the followers who published most of his work in his last years and especially, after his death. His most important works are theological works in the field of apologetics and polemics. These include:

*Qibla-numā:* written in response to Swami Dayananda Sarasvati who claimed that Muslims were idolaters because they faced the Kaʿba when praying, this works contains a rich discussion of monotheism, idolatry, and the metaphysics of orientation and presence; the first major Muslim work written in the newly emergent Hindu-Muslim polemics.

*Mubaḥisah-yi Shāhjahānpūr* and *Guftagū Madhhābī:* two accounts of the three-way debates between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians held in successive years in which Nānautvī articulates arguments against Christianity and Hinduism and develops a public apologetics for Islam.

*Taqrīr Dilpāzīr:* Nānautvī’s chief work of rational theology in which he argues that the truths of Islam can be verified through self-reflection and rationality.
**Ḥujjat al-Islām**: another major work of apologetics, this time written in response to Christian missionaries and including his critiques of Christian theological anthropology. The influence of this work can be seen in the fact that one of the most common honorifics Nānautvī is known to posterity by is Ḥujjat al-Islām.

**Intisār al-Islām**: his response to Dayananda’s arguments against Islam in which he uses Islamic sources, rationality, as well as Hindu sources to defend Islamic positions.

**Jawāb-i Turki bā Turki**: a further response to Arya Samaj refutations of Islam raised by Lajpat Rai, a more vociferous opponent of Islam than Dayananda.

**Taṣfīyat al-ʿAqāʾid**: his response to Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and a refutation of his modernist theological and legal positions; likely the first anti-modernist work written in Muslim South Asia.

**Tahdhīr al-Nās**: Nānautvī’s most historically controversial work which is a commentary on an exegesis of Ibn ʿAbbās in which Nānautvī argues for a creative metaphysical understanding of the finality of prophecy. This work was condemned by Sufi jurist and reformer Aḥmad Raẓā Khān, who issued a fatwa of takfīr for Nānautvī, and the Barelvī movement as denying the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad while it was used by the Qādiyānīs to justify their positions on prophecy after Muhammad.

**Āb-i Hayāt**: an abstruse theological commentary on various incidents on the life of the Prophet Muhammad; widely regarded as Nānautvī’s most difficult work, with Thānvī himself declaring that he was unable to understand it.

**Hadiyyat al-Shīʿa**: a detailed response to Shiʿi polemics against Sunni positions; this work shows a thorough knowledge of Shiʿi and Sunni positions and stands as an important work in the field
of Sunni-Shiʿi polemics which became a notable genre in the literature of the Walī Allāhī school after Shāh ʿAbd al-Azīz’s voluminous *Tuḥfa-yi Ithnā-ʿAshar*. Another work of Nānautvī responding to Shiʿis is *Al-Ajwiba al-Arbaʿ īn*.

Nānautvī also wrote on hadith, the interpretation of Qurʾanic verses, jurisprudential issues such as the validity of *tarāwīh* prayers and issues of ablution, the miracles of ʿAbd al-Qādir Jīlānī, and even on the Turko-Russian war in the Balkans, in which he implored Muslims to support Turkey.
Introduction

In this chapter, we will begin by looking at the relationship of revelation and reason, or more broadly, the intelligence (‘\(aql\))\textsuperscript{72} in Islamic intellectual history. This will be done by briefly examining the different perspectives, oppositional and conciliatory, that emerged in the broader Islamic tradition on how rationality interacted with revelation. I will focus on those perspectives that posited a mutuality or synthesis between the two—philosophical theology, doctrinal Sufism, and later philosophy or theosophy (\(hikma\))—as they together consist of the intellectual current that led to the work of Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī in nineteenth-century India. However, to contextualize Nānautvī, it is also important to briefly examine the history of these disciplines in India, which directly lead us to his work. Very significant to situating him is also a short work of the twentieth-century Indian scholar Qārī Muḥammad Ṭayyab, \textit{Hikmat al-Qāsimiyya}, which presents Nānautvī as the latest luminary in a tradition that extends back to the beginning of Islam. This is a tradition that stresses the reciprocal nature of revelation and the intelligence, and has been at the forefront of defending revelation against those that would distort reason to undermine it. This will take us to Nānautvī’s own important philosophico-theological work, \textit{Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr}, which aims to use rationality as the way to examine the nature of existence as

\textsuperscript{72} In Islamic intellectual traditions, the word ‘\(aql\) is used both to denote the faculty of intellect and that of reason. Whereas modern philosophy has largely seen these two as identical, or rather reduced the former to the latter, their usage in Islamic thought can be compared to the medieval Christian distinction between \textit{ratio} and \textit{intellecctus}, the first denoting an indirect and discursive approach to knowing—through logic or argument for example—and the later to a direct grasping of the truth intellectually—through intellectual intuition or gnosis for example. Thus, depending on the context, I have variously rendered ‘\(aql\) and its cognates as intellect, intelligence, reason, and rationality.
well as the claims of other religions, in order to argue for Islam as the most reasonable and compelling way to understand ourselves and the world. We will also look at how this work was the product of and functioned in a newly emergent modern public sphere in British India, and how Muslim scholars participated in it in order to compete with other religions as well as the new discourses of modernity. The purpose of this exercise will be to show how, in the hands of Nānautvī, classical Islamic theological and philosophical traditions enabled the use of a rational language to argue for religious claims in a modern public sphere. This modern public sphere constituted a new arena of discourse where competing visions of the world and of human life proliferated, and where rationality increasingly became the common language of communication and interaction between differing groups and perspectives. Nānautvī’s work contributed to the publicization of Islamic discourse in a plural context, and therefore to making a space both for religious language and arguments—more specifically Islamic arguments—in a modernizing and secularizing milieu in which religion was becoming one of many contending voices. In this chapter, we will: (1) situate Nānautvī in this tradition of reflection on the role of revelation and rationality; (2) examine the way in which revelation and rationality function in the work of Nānautvī; (3) and how, building upon philosophical theology and the hikma tradition, he articulates a vision of rational religion for the modern public sphere that emerged in mid-nineteenth century South Asia under British colonial rule.
The Relationship between Revelation and Rationality in the Islamic Tradition

In the theological discourse of Islam, as of the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity, the binary of revelation and reason has occupied an important place. The guiding question in this equation has been an epistemological one; what provides the surest knowledge, revelation from God or human reason? Many scholars have depicted this distinction as historically a result of the encounter of Hellenistic thought and traditions based on revelation and prophecy. Binyamin Abrahamov, for example, in his concise but probing *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, has portrayed the history of Islamic thought as a constant struggle between the forces of traditionalism—here referring to those that exclusively rely on the textual sources of revelation, the Qurʾan and the Sunnah—and those of rationalism: “The principal theological struggle in Islam . . . has taken place between traditionalist theologians and rationalists ones.” Abrahamov here is no doubt making an important point. Throughout Islamic history, from early Muslim encounters with Hellenized Christian theologians to modern debates on the opposition of religion and reason, this contestation between revelation and reason has been an important theme and has led to the development of a number of different positions and emphases. Although there are few that have rejected reason altogether, there have been those who strongly deemphasize it or attempt to regulate it in order to preserve the supremacy and literal word of revelation and tradition, as in the case of the Atharī (textualist) school represented

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74 Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology*, viii.
by Ḥanbalism in general or its modern descendents like Wahhabism and latter-day Salafism. An example of this anti-rationalist tendency is in the normative answer that Ḥanbalūs as well as early Ashʿarīs would give to controversial questions about God: bi-la kayf (without asking how), the practice that one must accept how God is portrayed in revelation without intellectual interrogation. Although there have been very few that have rejected revelation, there have been those that have, in various ways, argued that revelation is always subject to reason, such as the Muʿtazila, Peripatetic (mashshāʾī) philosophers like Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and various modernist Muslims. It is the struggle between these two camps that has often occupied those that have studied the relationship of revelation and reason in Islam, or in more contemporary terms, between Islam and rationality. In the text of Abrahamov cited above, it is largely the arguments between who he calls traditionalists, the Ḥanbalīs, and rationalists, like the Muʿtazila, that define the history of Islamic theology.

What can be criticized in such accounts is that they do not do justice to the far more complicated relationship between revelation and the intellect in the Islamic tradition. They do not fully take into account the evolving history of reason in the Islamic tradition, which can be seen as a progressive synthesis of different epistemologies, as we shall see, and in which reason itself is a contested term with rationality, intellection, and insight, coming to denote different dimensions of the intelligence. The mainstream of Islamic intellectual life has neither been traditionalist nor rationalist, neither Ḥanbalī nor Muʿtazī, or in the modern context, neither Salafi nor modernist. It has, in diverse ways, posited solutions that undercut this binary and see revelation and reason as not merely compatible but as intertwined, as ways in which human beings understand the

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75 I use “latter-day” to distinguish late twentieth-century Salafism with its textualist emphasis from the early Salafi movement of the late nineteenth century associated with Muhammad ʿAbduh, which had a much stronger rationalist emphasis.
Divine and whose roots are in Divine communication to human beings, whether this be in the prophets which God has sent to all peoples, or in the intelligence that He has given to all human beings. Reason here becomes an intrinsic dimension of revelation and a central way that God appeals to human beings to exercise their intellect to acquire knowledge, and reason without revelation is seen as a tool bereft of serving its ultimate purpose, that of illuminating human beings to the true nature of existence and their final destiny. Rationality is thus not something to be synthesized with revelation; it is seen as inherent in revelation itself or as one of multiple and often interrelated ways, such as those of revelation and spiritual insight, which result in knowledge.

I. The Qurʾan and the Hadith

The roots of such a perspective, in which the intelligence and rationality is seen as an intrinsic part of revelation, are in the Qurʾan itself. Knowledge—and therefore, the faculty associated with the gaining of that knowledge, the intelligence—are a recurring theme in the Qurʾan. For example, the word ʿilm (knowledge) and its cognates occur 750 times in the Qurʾan, making it one of the most widely used root words in the sacred book. In addition, the Qurʾan frequently utilizes a number of other Arabic root words from which can be derived many of the most important Arabic words related to knowledge in the Islamic tradition: intelligence (ʿaql), experiential knowledge and gnosis (maʿrifa), reflection (fiqh)—later designated as jurisprudence—understanding (fāhm), certainty (yaqīn), along with several others, not to mention the usage of the word wisdom (ḥikma), which later became synonymous with Islamic philosophy as will be seen below, in such verses as “He gives wisdom to whoever He will; whoever has been given wisdom truly has been given much good” (Qurʾan 2:269, Abdel Haleem translation).
The Qurʾan can be seen both as a book of knowledge and a book that instructs human beings to seek knowledge of the true reality of things. As a book containing knowledge, the Qurʾan can be seen as the fount of numerous topics that would be discussed in Islamic intellectual life through the centuries, from metaphysics and ontology to angelology, from prophecy to theological anthropology and ethics. As a book bidding human beings towards knowledge, the Qurʾan highlights the significance of using one’s intelligence, of reflection, objectivity, and insight in order to understand the nature of things. It references, for example, the *ulūʿl albāb*— those endowed with understanding (see for example, Qurʾan 39:18) and the *rasikhūn fī-l-ʿilm*— those firmly rooted in knowledge (see Qurʾan 3:7) as categories of human beings who have properly utilized their God-given intelligence to arrive at the truth. The Qurʾan also frequently uses rational arguments itself to persuade human beings of its message. Its use of logic has often been highlighted by Muslim scholars, noting that the Qurʾan asks not for a belief in miracles but an engagement with its logical arguments.

In addition to the Qurʾan, the Sunna, or practice, of the Prophet Muḥammad strongly emphasizes the significance of knowledge and wisdom, as numerous *ḥadīth* attest. For example, sayings of the Prophet assert: “The acquisition of knowledge is compulsory on every Muslim” (Ibn Māja), “The first thing that God created was the intellect” and “He who knows himself knows His Lord.” These and other sayings were widely used by Muslim scholars, theologians, philosophers, and Sufis, to argue for the necessity of intellectual and rational inquiry.

II. Philosophical Theology

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76 The latter two hadith, not found in the standard Sunni hadith collections, are nonetheless widely attributed to the Prophet. For a discussion about their use by Ibn al-ʿArabī, see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 250.
After the views on the intelligence and knowledge found in the Qurʾan and the hadith, some of the earliest debates on revelation, reason, and their relationship were those that emerged with the founding of *kalām*, dialectical theology. They focused largely on the defense of the tenets of faith that arose due to both inter-Muslim debates and Muslims encountering sophisticated theological traditions among Christians and to a lesser degree, the Persian religions.⁷⁷ Arguably, both of the most important early proponents of *kalām*, the Muʿtazila—who were the first to attempt a synthesis between Hellenistic thought with its emphasis on rationality and prophetic revelation—and their opponents⁷⁸, the early Ashʿarīs—who became the principal voice of Sunni theological orthodoxy and claimed a path between textualism and rationality—took for granted a dichotomy between reason and revelation. This can be seen in that both attempted a reconciliation between revelation, which was sent by God, and reason, which human beings possessed, the former rationalizing revelation and the latter subordinating it in the service of revelation.

There were, however, other perspectives that emerged which posited the mutuality of revelation and reason. Within the Sunni world, the foundations of this mutuality are perhaps first laid by the great al-Ghazālī, who drew upon the ideas of his teacher, Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī.⁷⁹ In his central work, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, al-Juwaynī made inquiry (*naẓar*) and reflection (*tafkīr*) a necessary part of obtaining knowledge, including that found in revelation, and therefore

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⁷⁸ For the Muʿtazila, see Martin, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*.

⁷⁹ For more on al-Juwaynī, see Mohammad Moslem Adel Saflø, *Al-Juwaynī’s Thought and Methodology: With a Translation and Commentary on Lumaʿ al-Adillah* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2000).
incumbent upon all. 80 This was among the first examples in Sunni kalām in which the intelligence was given a central role in understanding both God’s creation and His revelation. With the work of al-Ghazālī, which launches the tradition of theological reasoning which can be called philosophical theology, rationality becomes a significant way of not only refuting errors, as the early Ashʿarīs had done, but of understanding and explicating revelation itself. Furthermore, it can help explain the phenomena of the cosmos as well as the inner world of human beings. Al-Ghazālī was, however, also conscious of the limits of rationality, as can be evidenced by his intellectual and spiritual autobiography, al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl [Deliverance from Error] in which he narrates his journey, which does not stop at rationality but posits spiritual experience, encapsulated by his term dhawq, taste, as the highest form of knowing. 81 He has also been often misrepresented as an anti-rationalist due to his influential Tahāfut al-Falāsifa [The Incoherence of the Philosophers] in which he strongly critiques the views of Peripatetic philosophy especially on metaphysical issues. 82 His larger argument in the work and his oeuvre as a whole, however, is not against rationality or even philosophy, but against the use of logical and rational argument in matters that transcend rational comprehension and can only be known through revelation or spiritual understanding. Otherwise, al-Ghazālī can be seen to have actually incorporated the language of rationality and philosophy into the sciences of religion themselves. 83

80 See the selections from Kitāb al-Irshād on inquiry and knowledge in S. H. Nasr and M. Aminrazavi, An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia, Vol. 3: Philosophical Theology in the Middle Ages and Beyond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 61-68.
83 For more on Al-Ghazālī’s philosophical theology, see Frank Griffin, Al-Ghazzali’s Philosophical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Richard M. Frank, Al-Ghazālī and the Ash’arite School (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
The tradition of theological reasoning al-Ghazālī launched, was molded most significantly by Fakhr ad-Dīn al-Rāzī (1150-1210) into a full-fledged tradition of philosophical theology, often called later Islamic theology (kalām al-mutaʾakhkhirīn) which aimed to synthesize theology and philosophy and to use rationality and logic as a normative method to understand God and the cosmos. This tradition was further developed by others, such as ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-Ījī (1300-1355) and the two rivals at the court of Timur, Ṣadr al-Dīn Taftazānī (1322-1390) and al-Sayyid al-Šarīf al-Jurjānī (1339-1414), and became the primary form of Sunni kalām in later centuries.84

In addition to theology adopting the language and even the ideas of philosophy, which can be seen, for example, in the increasing emphasis among theologians on the concept of wujūd, being or existence, explicated by the philosophers, as well as the introduction of rational modes of knowing, as we saw above in al-Juwaynī, another tradition that began to develop along speculative and theoretical lines, and eventually, incorporating philosophical ideas and language, was Sufism.

III. Doctrinal Sufism

The early Sufi tradition was largely oriented towards praxis, focused on asceticism, methods to overcome the self (nafs), and the remembrance of God. Although theoretical expressions of Islamic spirituality and esoterism existed in early Shiʿism, in the Sufi tradition, despite a few early works by figures like al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī and later, al-Ghazālī, the theoretical exposition of Sufi doctrine came to its fullest flowering with the prodigious output of Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165-1240). Drawing on all the sciences available to him, from grammar and Qurʾanic interpretation to the cosmological sciences and philosophy, Ibn al-ʿArabī founded an intellectual perspective in

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84 It should be noted that Shiʿi kalām is even more influenced by philosophy due to its development at the hands of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, who was the reviver of Avicenna and Peripatetic philosophy after the attack of al-Ghazālī in the Tahāfut al-falāsifa.
which the intelligence and revelation, like everything else in the cosmos, were loci of Divine manifestation. In other words, reason and revelation both functioned to reveal the truth of the Divine reality in their own ways. Furthermore, Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school\textsuperscript{85} established a way of expressing the truths of revelation that relied on the intellect but was not bound to the language of Hellenistic philosophy even though it was in conversation with it. In theoretical or doctrinal Sufism (\textit{taṣawwuf al-naẓari})\textsuperscript{86}, the intellect, when not cut off from revelation, became not only a means by which one could rationally understand the world or revelation, but as a primary means of spiritual comprehension and attainment to God; not merely a preliminary tool but a necessary dimension of the journey to God. The significance of knowledge, or more specifically, gnosis (\textit{maʿrifā}), was thus central in this tradition as the path to approaching the Divine. This knowledge could be gained in a rudimentary and theoretical form through rationality but spiritual realization would need more refined, direct, and experiential modes of the intellect. Here again, we see a different way of reaching a mutuality between revelation and rationality, or more precisely, the intelligence, in the Islamic tradition.

IV. \textit{Ḥikma} and the Fate of Philosophy in later Sunni Islam

Arguably the most elaborate synthesis of revelation and the intellect can be seen in the later Islamic philosophical tradition, often termed \textit{ḥikma}, literally wisdom but sometimes translated as theosophy or philosophy. The term \textit{ḥikma} is contested, as we shall see, and different groups in different times have laid claimed to it. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, for example, identifies it with philosophical \textit{kalām}, while others have identified it with doctrinal Sufism. One reason for its


\textsuperscript{86} For an overview of doctrinal or theoretical Sufism, or gnosis (\textit{irfān}), as it is widely known in Persia, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, \textquotedblleft Theoretical Gnosis and Doctrinal Sufism and Their Significance Today,\textquotedblright \textit{Transcendent Philosophy} 6 (2005): 1-36.

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wide usage by different authors and groups is the privileged status it has in the Qurʾan as well as
in some hadith, where it is used to denote God-given wisdom.\footnote{For a discussion of the term within a larger discussion of the meaning of philosophy in the Islamic tradition, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Meaning and Role of Philosophy in Islam” in his \textit{Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present}, 31-47.} The most pervasive use of it and
the way we will be using it here is to refer to the later Islamic philosophical tradition, which is no
longer the Islamization of Greek philosophy as with the Peripatetic philosophers but a tradition
that incorporates pre-Islamic and Islamic philosophical traditions, revelation and the sciences
associated with it, along with mysticism and \textit{kalām}. It is this tradition that largely informs both
the intellectual milieu and particular philosophical and theological perspective of Nānautvī,
although he is also greatly indebted to and often expresses himself in the language of
philosophical \textit{kalām}. In order to understand the \textit{Ḥikma} tradition and its genealogy and
perspective, however, we need to first look at the fate of philosophy in the later Islamic tradition,
particularly in a Sunni context, and the misunderstandings that have informed conventional
narratives of the history of Islamic philosophy.

It has been argued that Orientalists privileged a text-based understanding of Oriental, including
Islamic, societies; the texts they privileged were Arabic, written by authors residing in the Arab
heartland, invested in a Sunni Ashʿarī legalistic “orthodoxy”.\footnote{See Marshall Hodgson, \textit{The Venture of Islam, Vol. 1}, and his arguments regarding an “Arabist bias” which have also been discussed above in Ch. 1.} Many critics of Orientalism focus
on what kind of distortions they introduced into the views of the people they were studying due
to their own presuppositions; I believe an opposite criticism can also be made, that they accepted
the self-narrative of the majority tradition of classical Sunni Islam too readily, particularly in
regards to philosophy and related intellectual pursuits, and universalized it to all times and places
as regards the Muslim world. The self-narrative of a certain era of Sunni “orthodoxy” was taken
at face value and universalized: that al-Ghazālī, through his \textit{Tahāfut al-Falāsifa}, destroyed
philosophy, a discipline which was borrowed from non-Muslim sources and reached conclusions based on Greek thought and reason, once and for all in the Sunni world. The earlier Western writings on philosophy in the Islamic world pointedly ended with Ibn Rushd, the last Muslim philosopher who supposedly made a last-ditch, albeit unsuccessful, effort to save philosophy from the dogmatists.\textsuperscript{89} Such a narrative was also based on the fact that Averroes was the last Muslim philosopher historically studied in Europe before the fall of Spain and the coming of the Renaissance severed the intellectual ties between the Muslim and Christian worlds. This perspective was challenged by a number of scholars, particularly Henri Corbin\textsuperscript{90} and later Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who not only asserted that there were major later philosophers in the Islamic world but that the tradition of Islamic philosophy, under a different name and guise, was still alive and thriving in Shi‘ite Iran. This challenge bore fruit as major figures such as al-Tūṣī, Suhrawardī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, who were introduced in the discourse on Islamic philosophy. But if one were to rely solely on the work of Corbin, who privileged the Shi‘i dimensions and associations of later Islamic philosophy, all these figures flourished mainly in the Shi‘i context of Iran. What was the fate of philosophy in the Sunni world—the Arab lands, Ottoman Turkey, Muslim India? If philosophy only was confined to the Shi‘i world, how do we situate a figure like Nānautvī or his more illustrious predecessor Shāh Walī Allāh, who obviously use it in their central arguments? To make sense of the historical distance between al-Ghazālī and Shāh Walī Allāh or Nānautvī, one must find alternative ways of explaining the “survival” of philosophy in the Sunni world.

\textsuperscript{89} See for example a classical work like T.J. Boer, \textit{History of Philosophy in Islam} (London: Luzac, 1965), originally published 1898. The neglect of later Islamic philosophy, however, continues until far more recently and even today among some scholars of Islamic philosophy. Majid Fakhry’s standard work on Islamic philosophy, \textit{History of Islamic Philosophy} (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2004, originally published, 1970), for example, needed an addendum in recent editions to include later Islamic philosophy.

\textsuperscript{90} Much of the bibliography of Corbin is devoted to later Islamic philosophy. For an overview, see his \textit{History of Islamic Philosophy}, trans. Liadain Sherrad (London: Kegan Paul International, 1994) and for a more thorough study, his 4 volume \textit{En Islam Iranien, aspects spirituels et philosophiques} (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-72).
Let us briefly outline some of the ways that philosophical thought continued to persist in the Sunni world. Al-Ghazālī may have contributed to the decline of integral falsafa in a Hellenistic mold (called mashshāʾī or Peripatetic philosophy) in the Sunni world, but this falsafa did not really die; it transmuted and began to appear under various guises and was actually able to penetrate a far wider range of Islamic disciplines than in its supposed heyday. The non-metaphysical aspects of it, which al-Ghazālī did not attack, in particular, seemed to continue to be read and taught in the Sunni world. Al-Ghazālī himself appropriated the structure and vocabulary of philosophy and applied it to a broad range of disciplines. This method was further developed by later scholastic theologians, particularly Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī. Philosophy, particularly in its metaphysical and epistemological dimensions, was also absorbed into the burgeoning tradition of doctrinal or philosophical Sufism. The school of Ibn al-ʿArabī was much more systematically philosophical than the master himself as the commentaries on the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* by Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunyawī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qashānī, Daʿūd al-Qaysarī, and others show. Most significantly, new schools of Islamic philosophy arose, foremost amongst them the Ishrāqī, or Illuminationist, school founded by Suhrawardī, which may have found its deepest resonance in Persia but was very influential in both the Sunni climes of the Ottoman world and Muslim India, as was Nasir al-Dīn al-Tūṣī, who represented an Avicennan revival that was influential down the centuries in Sunni circles. Many other later philosophers wielded influence among Sunnis such as Jalāl al-Dīn Dawānī and Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī. Similarly, the school of Shiraz, particularly through Mullā Ṣadrā was influential in Sunni circles into the twentieth century, with a book of Ṣadrā’s (his commentary on al-Abhari’s *Hidāyat al-Ḥikma*) appear even on the syllabus of Deoband. Islamic revivalist and theoretician of political Islam Abū ʿAlā al-Mawdūdī was a translator of Ṣadrā in his pre-reformist days. There continued to be home-grown
philosophers of import in the Sunni world, among the more well-known being the Ottoman philosopher Ismāʿīl Ankaravī and the Indian Maḥmūd Jawnpurī, part respectively of the little-studied Ottoman and Indian branches of Islamic philosophy.

It should also be stressed that philosophical thought continued not only through major intellectual figures and schools but also in the structure of Sunni scholarship and education itself. This can be seen in the bipartite division of the Islamic disciplines into al-ʿulūm al-naqliyya (the transmitted sciences) and al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya (the rational or intellectual sciences). The former dealt with disciplines that were revealed in origin and handed down, such as the Qur’anic sciences, ʿilm al-ḥadīth, jurisprudence (fiqh), and grammar. The latter dealt with disciplines that necessitated human reason and interpretation, such as philosophy, logic, mathematics, and the natural sciences. In practice, however, the two were not rigorously separated, with transmitted sciences increasingly understood through interpretation and rationality, and the intellectual sciences supported and synthesized with data from the revealed sources in the later Sunni tradition. This classification of the sciences was itself first developed by philosophers like al-Fārābī and was formulated in different ways by different philosophers and theologians, with the classifications of al-Ghazālī and to a lesser extent, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, being particularly influential.91 These classifications into the transmitted and intellectual was not merely theoretical but became the basis of most madrasa education in both Sunni and Shiʿi milieus. In Muslim India, the bipartite division of subjects into transmitted and intellectual in Sunni educational institutions was normative from the Mughal era until the early twentieth century and still

survives to a large extent. It found its most significant expression in the celebrated Dars-i Nizāmiyya formulated by Mullā Nizām al-Dīn of Farangi Mahall, which emphasized the rational sciences and became the most widespread curriculum in Muslim South Asia. It was a revised version of this syllabus, which included works of logic, natural philosophy, and metaphysics, that Nānautvī chose as the curriculum for the madrasa at Deoband, the major difference being a much stronger emphasis on the transmitted sciences in keeping with the revivalist genealogy of its founders.

In terms of content, early Islamic philosophy of the Peripatetic school was greatly influenced by the great Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, but also their Neoplatonic commentators. That said, the specificity of the interplay between the Greek and the Islamic heritage must be recognized in Islamic philosophy, particularly in its Peripatetic form. It has been argued by many modern scholars both Western and Muslim that the philosophers who flourished in the lands of Islam may have mostly been Muslims but the philosophy they were engaged in was not Islamic in nature. This view ignores how centrally the Islamic revelation determined the discursive boundaries of the work of the classical Islamic philosophers. The Islamic philosophers lived in a world where the truths brought by the Qur’anic revelation and the person of the Prophet Muḥammad were given realities. The discursive boundaries of the universe they functioned in were set by the questions and issues raised by the Qur’an and the idea of

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92 These classifications from the pre-Mughal to the modern period are listed and discussed in G.M.D. Sufi, Al-Minhaj: Being the Evolution of the Curriculum in the Muslim Educational Institutions of the Indo-Pakistani Subcontinent (Lahore: India Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1941).
93 For a listing of the original Dars-i Nizāmiyya at the time of Mullā Nizām al-Dīn, see Table 2 in Francis Robinson, “Scholarship and Mysticism in Early Eighteenth-Century Awadh” in The ‘Ulama’ of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia, 48-50.
94 For a detailed list of assigned works in the Deoband syllabus, which was taught over eight years, see Sufi, Al-Minhaj, 128-134.
95 This is reflected, for example, in labelling Islamic philosophy “Arabic philosophy” to emphasize its “secular” and borrowed nature. This labelling, although used widely by Orientalists and later discredited, has recently been revived as can be seen in the publication of the Cambridge Guide to Arabic Philosophy, the first major scholarly work to use that title in decades.
prophecy and whatever foreign knowledge traditions were absorbed by Muslims came to be integrated into this pre-existing Qur’anic and Prophetic framework. There were exceptions to this rule, but by and large, the very concerns of the Islamic philosophers, even when couched in Greek conceptual terminology, were strongly shaped by central Islamic issues such as the unity of the Divine Principle, the reality of prophecy as a mode of knowledge, and the creation of an ethically righteous society. Later Islamic philosophy, beginning with Suhrāwrādī, came to be ever more direct in its reference to the centrality of revelation. This was part of its development of a more synthetic nature which brought together the concerns of theology, mysticism, as well as the Islamic revelation, under a philosophical umbrella. Due to these reasons, Islamic philosophy has been called “prophetic philosophy.”

After al-Ghazālī’s critique of the Peripatetic philosophers, Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrāwrādī, (1153-1191), honorifically called Shaykh al-Ishrāq, the Master of Illumination, founded a new school of Islamic philosophy, the Illuminationist school. In forging a new synthesis, Suhrāwrādī integrated the earlier Greek philosophical tradition focusing on Pythagoras and Plato with the wisdom traditions of the ancient Persian sages all within an avowedly Islamic matrix which drew on the Qur‘an as well as the teachings of the Sufi tradition. It was with him that Islamic philosophy began to reference the Qur‘an and Sunna directly, a tendency that continued to grow in the following centuries. By drawing on mysticism, Suhrāwrādī also stressed the significance of direct knowledge through spiritual illumination, introducing the distinction between “acquired knowledge” (‘ilm ḥuṣūlī) and “knowledge by presence” (‘ilm ḥudūrī). With the Illuminationist

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96 This was the appellation given to it by the great scholar of Islamic philosophy, Henri Corbin, and has been championed also by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as can be seen in the title of his latest work on philosophy, Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).
school, a more sophisticated understanding of knowledge and its acquisition through the intellect came into being in Islamic philosophy, an understanding that could posit empirical, rational, mystical, and revelatory modes of knowing as legitimate and different from, but not opposed to, each other.

Several centuries of philosophical activity after the founding of the School of Illumination by Suhrawardī and the revival of Avicennan philosophy by al-Ṭūsī, these strands came together in the founding of the final major school of Islamic philosophy during the reign of the Safavids in Isfahan in Persia. The school was founded by Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631); but the crown of the school was none other than his student ṢADR al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, better known as Mullā ṢADRā (1571-1640), increasingly recognized by many as the greatest of all Islamic philosophers. 98 His work synthetically unites the following strands of the Islamic tradition: Peripatetic philosophy, Ishrāqī philosophy, the gnosis and mysticism of the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī and other Sufī theoreticians, the kalām tradition and the Islamic revelation, the Qurʾān along with the sayings of the Prophet and the Shiʿite Imams, even writing philosophical commentaries on verses of the Qurʾān. This synthesis—which ṢADRā called the hikmat al-mutaʿāliya, or transcendent theosophy or philosophy, was based on what he delineated as the three paths to the truth open to human beings: revelation (waḥy), intellection (ʿaql) and mystical unveiling (kashf). This tripartite epistemology more systematically enunciated the multiple ways of knowing which were also present in Ishrāqī philosophy. ṢADRā’s synthesis was no doubt the most comprehensive integration of the different forms of knowledge that Muslim theologians and philosophers had

98 There is an increasing body of works on Mullā ṢADRā as he becomes recognized as arguably the most comprehensive philosophical mind produced by the Islamic world. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ṢADR al-Dīn Shīrāzī and His Transcendent Philosophy (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 1997), Sajjad Rizvi, Mullā ṢADRā Shīrāzī His Life, Works and Sources for Safavid Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Ibrahim Kalin, Knowledge in Later Islamic Philosophy: Mullā ṢADRā on Existence, Intellect, and Intuition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
been debating over the centuries. It came to signify the very meaning of ḥikma in later Islamic philosophy.

V. Islamic Intellectual Traditions in South Asia

The history of Islamic thought in South Asia is yet to be written. Although there is a good amount of primary and secondary literature on South Asian Sufi culture, the same cannot be said for doctrinal and philosophical Sufism in South Asia except for a very few major figures. The situation of Islamic theology in South Asia is even more precarious. But the rich tradition of Islamic philosophy in Muslim India, the most developed in the Sunni world, undoubtedly fares the worst. There is yet to be a full-length study on either Islamic philosophy or theology in South Asia in Western or Islamic languages, although the extensive but unwieldy works of S.A.A. Rizvi\textsuperscript{99} as well as the works of Francis Robinson on the school of Farangi Mahall\textsuperscript{100} provide a good starting point for understanding the basic currents of Islamic thought in South Asia. Unfortunately, most scholars of South Asia, when writing on intellectual history, are not nearly as comprehensive as Rizvi. We will see in Ch. 3 how Aziz Ahmad, the Canadian Indian scholar of Islam, provides a conventional scholarly account of Hindu-Muslim relations influenced both by Orientalism and the two-nation theory. Here, let us briefly look at another work of Aziz Ahmad, \textit{An Intellectual History of Islam in India}\textsuperscript{101}, a work that poses as a comprehensive overview of the subject but is representative in its lack of attention to the intellectual, and not sectarian and religio-cultural, history of Muslim South Asia. This neglect is evident just by


\textsuperscript{100} Robinson, \textit{The ʿUlama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia}, collects many of his most significant articles and essays on the subject.

\textsuperscript{101} Aziz Ahmad, \textit{An Intellectual History of Islam in India} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969).
looking at the table of content of the work, which has chapters on the following subjects: Sunni Orthodoxy, Shi’i Sects, Messianic Movements, Orthodox Sufism, Folk-Beliefs, Education, Literature in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, Literature in Urdu and the Regional Languages, and Fine Arts. The work evidently has a lot to say about many subjects pertaining to various Islamic sects and movements as well as Muslim culture in India but it has nothing at all to say of Islamic philosophy, theology, or even theoretical Sufism. It is not surprising that the conclusion has often been drawn that these do not exist in Muslim South Asia, or if they do, are merely derivative. Standard histories of Islamic philosophy still fail to cover later Islamic philosophy in South Asia and the Ottoman Empire.\footnote{102} Many reasons can be given for this including the ones described in chapter one regarding the neglect of the later Islamic scholarly and intellectual traditions in general. But here, the idea that philosophy had a limited career in the Muslim world and ended with Ibn Rushd no doubt plays a major role. Even when Corbin and others demonstrated the existence of major later philosophical traditions in the Muslim world, this was almost completely confined to Shi’ite Persia.

Given the paucity of information regarding it, one can say little about Islamic philosophy and philosophical theology in South Asia. So how do we chart the career of Islamic thought in South Asia? There are a number of ways that one can approach this topic. A full study of Islamic philosophy in Muslim India would require an extensive study of works still in manuscript form in South Asian libraries and collections. However, there are some important works that have

\footnote{102} The two major collections devoted to a comprehensive overview of Islamic philosophy are M.M. Sharif, ed., \textit{A History of Muslim Philosophy. With short accounts of other disciplines and the modern renaissance in Muslim lands} (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963-1966) and \textit{History of Islamic Philosophy}, edited by S.H. Nasr and Oliver Leaman. Both have chapters on Shâh Wâlî Allâh, but ironically, they both have little to say about his philosophical views, precisely because they have not been studied and placed in the larger history of Islamic philosophy in South Asia. The latter edited volume, however, does include a useful short chapter on Islamic philosophy in “India”, by Hafiz Ghaflar Khan, the first of its kind: \textit{History of Islamic Philosophy}, Vol. 2, 1051-75. See also Hamid Naseem, “Rational Sciences in Medieval India,” in \textit{Muslim Philosophy, Science, and Mysticism} (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2001), 268-84.
been printed and others that have been discussed in secondary literature. There are also curricula used in South Asia that list many works of philosophy and philosophical theology such as the aforementioned Dars-i Niẓāmiyya. There are also figures from the last three centuries, especially those associated with Shāh Wali Allāh and his school, like Nānautvī, whose works are available and in print, and can give us an indication of the intellectual schools they descend from.

The Peripatetic school, philosophical kalām, as well as Ibn al-ʿArabī and his school103 were introduced in South Asia quite early at the time of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), although philosophy was already being studied prior to that in Ismaʿili areas such as Multan. There seems to have been some opposition to rational philosophy in this early post-Ghazālian period. But Peripatetic works, especially in logic and natural philosophy, continued to be taught throughout the centuries until the contemporary period and can be found in the syllabi of Farangi Mahall as well as Deoband into the twentieth century. No matter what their overall orientation, there was a strong Peripatetic influence on almost all the major philosophers in Muslim India, due partially to the popularity of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī’s works and his revival of Peripatetic philosophy.

Philosophical kalām, through the works of al-Rāzī and also al-Ījī, was also introduced and flourished in this period and was further popularized under the Mughals, who saw al-Jurjānī and al-Taftazānī, who worked at the court of their ancestor Timur, as part of their ancestral heritage.

The Illuminationist school, which we know the least about among the important philosophical schools in Muslim India, began to make an impact in the fourteenth century and became particularly influential in the Mughal era. This was in part due to the great popularity of Jalāl al-Dīn Dāwānī (b. 1427; d. 1502-3), who was both an Ishrāqī philosopher and a philosophical

theologian in South Asia. The importance of Illuminationist philosophy was such that it provided the framework for the religio-political philosophy of for the reign of the emperor Jalāl al-Dīn Akbar (1542-1605). The significance of Akbar for the intellectual life of Muslim India cannot be overemphasized. His era begins “the golden age of the intellectual sciences in India.” Akbar, deeply interested in gaining knowledge from a wide area of viewpoints, invited scholars, philosophers, theologians, and mystics of all orientations, to discuss and debate in meetings held at the imperial court. He also invited scholars and philosophers of other traditions such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity as well as from different Muslim sects. His closest advisor and confidante was Abū al-Faḍl (1551-1602), who, deeply informed by Illuminationist philosophy, constructed a whole political philosophy around Akbar’s rule focusing on the theme of the philosopher-king as the recipient of divine illumination. It is actually this perspective that informs the founding of the widely misunderstood Dīn-i Ilāhī, the Divine Religion that detractors have used as a proof of Akbar’s heterodoxy or even infidelity, claiming that he founded a new religion. The Dīn-i Ilāhī was instead an imperial cult followed by a small number of court officials who enrolled as Akbar’s disciples and revolved around total commitment to the emperor and his politico-spiritual nature, as defined by Abū al-Faḍl. Abū al-Faḍl and others were also at the forefront of a major translation movement of Hindu texts into Persian that peaks in the later Mughal period with Prince Dārā Shikoh. Perhaps the most significant event for Islamic philosophy in South Asia during Akbar’s reign was his invitation of Mīr Fatḥ Allāh al-Shīrāzī (d. 1589), a student of the great member of the school of Shiraz, Ghiyāth al-Dīn al-Manṣūr al-Dashtakī (1462-1543) as well as of Jamāl al-Dīn Maḥmūd, who directly studied with Dawānī, to his court. His significance can be noted through three points: His enduring educational reforms

104 Hafiz Ghaffar Khan, “India”, 1061.
introduced works of *hikma* and philosophical theology to the curriculums of the madrasahs, both Sunni and Shiʿi. He wrote a number of important commentaries on texts of philosophy and philosophical theology by Tūsī, Jurjānī, and Dawānī as well as original works. Perhaps most consequentially, it was through his intellectual lineage that major later schools of philosophy such as those of Farangi Mahall and Khayrabad came to be established.\(^\text{106}\)

There were many other important philosophers and *ḥukamāʾ* in the Mughal era such as ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkoṭī (d. 1656) and Mullā Maḥmūd al-Jaunpūrī (1603-1652). The latter is most notable for being the author of the most celebrated text of philosophy written in Muslim India, *Shams al-Bāzigha*, which was the most widely taught philosophical text in South Asian madrasa curricula, along with the *Sharḥ-i hidāyat al-ḥikma* of Mullā Ṣadrā. He is also notable for attending the philosophical circle of the founder of the school of Shiraz, Mīr Dāmād (d. 1631) and teacher of Mullā Ṣadrā, during his travels. A notable philosopher of the late Mughal period was Mirzā Muḥammad Zāhid al-Harawī, who is significant for the line of Shāh Walī Allāh that Nānautvī belonged to, as he was the principal teacher of Shah ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, father and teacher of Shāh Walī Allāh. Harawī was a student of Mirzā Jān al-Shirāzī, who was in the line of Dawānī, and he combined Peripatetic and Ishrāqī philosophy with philosophical theology, writing commentaries on the works of Ṭūsī and Jurjānī, and on Dawānī’s commentaries on Suhrawardī and Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī.

Undoubtedly the most influential figure in the intellectual life of Muslim South Asia in the last three centuries is Shāh Walī Allāh, who we have already discussed in the previous chapter. To that we can add that the great contribution of ShāhWalī Allāh in the annals of Islamic philosophy, or *hikma*, in a Sunni context, is his grand synthesis of nearly all the major disciplines

\(^{106}\) For more on Fatḥ Allāh al-Shīrāzī, see Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origins to the Present*, 204-207.
and schools that came before him. Thus, using his method of harmonization, taṭbīq, in which truth is multi-faceted and perceived differently by different observers depending on their vantage points, Shāh Walī Allāh integrated the different schools of philosophy, kalām, Sufism, and the transmitted sciences into a whole. Although he seems to move from one perspective to another depending on what discipline a particular work of his is situated in, his mature works and his oeuvre stands as a testament to this synthesis. As part of the revivalist tendency of eighteenth-century South Asian Islam, Shāh Walī Allāh is also closely concerned with bringing the intellectual sciences in harmony with the transmitted sciences. His major work, Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bālīgha, seamlessly weaves the Qur’an and especially the hadith in complex philosophical and theological discussions. The Ḥujjat is in fact the most important precursor to the work of Nānautvī in that it is the first major work in the early modern period to use rationality to explicate the truths communicated through revelation, as we will see in more detail below.

In Persia, ḥikma came to be largely identified with Mullā Ṣadrā’s ḥikmat al-mutaʿāliya and the School of Shiraz. In India, ḥikma was used variably by different authors but its most pervasive form was to be found in the grand synthesis of Shāh Walī Allāh. Walī Allāh often speaks of ḥikma and its possessors, the hukama, in his works. He defines ḥikma as “the science by which the true nature of existing things can be known,” a definition which is able to encompass all the sciences and disciplines that reveal something of the truth, yet which posits that it is through ḥikma that reality as it is can fundamentally be known. For Shāh Walī Allāh, the ḥakīm is an intermediary between the prophet (nabī) and the saint (walī), and is the true inheritor of the work


109 Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya, II: 24, quoted in Baljon, Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī 1703-1762, 117.
of the prophets. Another way of representing Walī Allāh’s perspective on ḥikma would be to see it as the synthesis of his tripartite classification of knowledge into the transmitted sciences associated with revelation (manqūlāt), the intellectual sciences associated with reason and intelligence (ma‘qūlāt) and the spiritual, literally unveiled, sciences (makshūfāt) associated with Sufism and esoteric knowledge. It is in this sense that ḥikma was understood by the heirs of Walī Allāh such as Nañautvī and Ṭayyīb, as we will see below. The difficulty in this understanding of ḥikma is that it is sometimes hard to distinguish philosophy, philosophical theology, and doctrinal Sufism from each other because they are interwoven in the works of the later intellectual tradition in South Asia.

Walī Allāh’s four sons carried on his legacy, each specializing in a discipline with Shāh Rafīʿ al-Dīn being especially given to the intellectual sciences. Walī Allāh’s grandson Shāh Ismāʿīl Shāhīd was one of the most fascinating as well as controversial figures in later Indian Muslim history. The apparent paradox of his career is that on the one hand, he was a direct representative of the theosophical strand of Shāh Walī Allāh’s thought. His ‘Abaqāt111 is a brilliant commentary on Shāh Walī Allāh’s metaphysical, cosmological, and philosophical teachings in light of figures of the schools of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Mullā Ṣadrā. On the other, he was the author of one of the most controversial tracts written in the Subcontinent in the last two hundred years, the Taqwiyāt al-Imān, in which his denunciation of popular custom among Indian Muslims has been widely denounced by critics as akin to Wahhabism. Although Ismāʿīl seemed to manifest these tendencies in the extreme, his example helps define two of the hallmarks of the Walī Allāhī tradition that we can find in Nañautvī and others: an intellectually grounded understanding of

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revelation and a commitment to religious revival through reorientation towards the primary sources of religion. The intellectual legacy of Walī Allāh is by far the most significant for Nānautvī but it should be mentioned that other intellectual currents and philosophical schools were highly influential in the late Mughal and post-Mughal periods, as well as in Nānautvī’s time itself. These were primarily the aforementioned schools of Farangi Mahall and Khayrabad. The former, in addition to the Dars-i Niẓāmī curriculum, produced some of the most important philosophers and logicians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Muḥibb Allāh al-Bihārī (d. 1707), author of the most widely taught South Asian work on logic, *Sullam al-ʿulūm*¹¹² and a commentary on Ṣadrā, and ʿAbd al-ʿĀlī (1737-1810), known as Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, who was a master of doctrinal Sufism, writing a commentary on Rumi in the light of Ibn al-ʿArabī, and of the intellectual sciences.¹¹³ The school of Khayrabad, originally an offshoot of Farangi Mahall, itself boasted the most important nineteenth century philosopher of Muslim India, Faḍl-i Ḥaqq al-Khayrābādī (1787-1861), who wrote many works on metaphysics, natural philosophy, logic, and *kalām*, and is remembered for being the first signatory of the fatwa for jihad against the British during the uprising of 1857, for which he was condemned to the Andaman Islands.

Nānautvī’s own direct connection to ḥikma and other intellectual traditions was primarily through his teacher Mamlūk ʿAlī, who we have discussed in Ch. 1. Furthermore, his spiritual master Hājjī Imdād Allāh belonged to the Sabīrī branch of the Chishtīyya, which emphasized both sobriety and gnosis, as opposed to the Niẓāmī branch, whose emphasis was on intoxication and love. Muḥibb Allāh Ḥilāhābādī, called the Ibn al-ʿArabī of India, was a master of the Chishtī-

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and it may well be that Nānautvī had exposure to the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī through this connection, although his biographies do not make this clear. What is very clearly stated in his biographies is his precociousness in the intellectual sciences and his mastery of the major works of philosophy and logic taught in South Asia. A quotation given in Gīlānī’s biography of Nānautvī shows this and also what books he mastered: “He read the difficult works of the intellectual sciences such as Mīr Zāhid, Qāḍī [Mubārak], Ṣadrā, Shams Bāzīgha in such a way that a ḥāfīz recites the Qurʾan.” This and other similar quotations are further explained by Gīlānī as especially surprising because the difficulty of the subject matter of advanced philosophy and logic is such that students were normally taught a half-page or page at a time, so someone reciting it like the Qurʾan is truly exceptional.

Nānautvī and Intellectual Renewal (tajdīd): Muḥammad Ṭayyab’s History of the Islamic Intellectual Tradition

Walter Benjamin, in his critique of historicism, stated: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” This statement would be an apt description of the intentionality of Indian Muslim scholar and philosophical theologian Muḥammad Ṭayyab in his Ḥikmat al-Qāsimīyya, a work which serves both as a history of the Islamic intellectual tradition and more specifically, of the role and place of Nānautvī in this long tradition, hence the title’s referring to Nānautvī’s given name. The artifice of modern historical writing aimed to, with an air of

114 See G.A. Lipton, “The Equivalence” (Al-Taswiya) of Muḥibb Allah Ilahabadi: Avicennan Neoplatonism and the School of Ibn ʿArabī in South Asia (Saarbrucken: VDM, 2009).
115 Gīlānī, Sawāniḥ-i Qāsimī I, 241. Gīlānī also mentions that Nānautvī had also studied Sullam al-ʿUlūm and Maybūdī. For more information on many of these works, see Robinson, The ʿUlama of Farangi Mahall, 249-51.
disinterested objectivity, make a detailed account of the past “as it was” with claims of historical accuracy and factuality. It presumed that facts speak for themselves as if every act of history writing did not have a specific framework in which it operates, with specific assumptions of the nature of time, specific interests, and specific goals. Benjamin’s critique is of this historicism, of a history that claims to know “the way it really was.” His articulation of what it really means to approach the past would resonate with Ṭayyab, who specifically portrayed Nānautvī as the very man of insight and guidance, an exemplar of the Islamic intellectual tradition who emerged at the moment of need—the time of crisis and danger—to renew and revitalize Islamic thought and the Muslim community, as others had in similar moments of need before him at a time of crisis when internal decay and external domination threatened to destroy it. As such, Ṭayyab’s work squarely places Nānautvī in a historical narrative of the battle between revelation and reason, which began in the early years of the expansion of Islam and continued to progressively unfold in various forms through the centuries culminating in the contemporary struggle between Islam and modernity. Nānautvī emerges as a God-send, the latest champion of using the sound intellect (ʿaql salīm) to defend revelation against those employing the worldly intellect (ʿaql nārsā) to diminish the significance of revelation and religion. The narrative serves to not only redeem religion but also rationality and the intelligence. It shows how the latter can preserve the former, and how the two can function together to arrive at the truth. Ṭayyab’s work can also be seen as a succinct exposition of and commentary on the principal intellectual project of Nānautvī and stands as the only work of its kind.

117 In an insightful study that investigates Ṭayyab’s notions of history and temporality, Ebrahim Moosa states: “Ṭayyab’s notion of history in many ways resembles a form of historia, where narrative frames the key questions of his interpretative paradigm,” in his “History and Normativity in Traditional Indian Muslim Thought: Reading Shari’a in the Hermeneutics of Qari Muhammad Ṭayyab (d. 1983)” in Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism, ed. C.W. Ernst and R.C. Martin (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 187. This is the only scholarly article on Ṭayyab in Western languages.
Muḥammad Ṭayyab (1897-1983) was the best-known muhtamim, or principal, of Dār al-ʿUlūm Deoband in post-partition India. In an era when Deoband had become increasingly politicized in the wake of the independence movement, he represented the older emphasis on scholarship and piety that marked the founding generations of the school. He was the grandson of Nānautvī and a key representative and continuer of his project of defending revelation through reason in the modern era. In addition, he was also a khalīfa, spiritual representative, of Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī, who, despite never studying directly with Nānautvī, can be viewed as the most important successor of Nānautvī in the exposition and defense of the Islamic intellectual tradition combined with a serious critique of modern thought.  Ṭayyab’s interest in the intellectual sciences, for which his peers conferred the title ḥakīm al-Islām (Savant of Islam) upon him, is what distinguishes him from among the later Deobandi scholars. Deoband from its inception had encouraged an increasing emphasis on Qurʾan and hadith, but some early Deobandis, especially Nānautvī, were keen to balance this with a solid grounding in the intellectual sciences, following in the tradition of Shāh Walī Allāh. By the post-Partition era, however, there remained far less interest in the intellectual sciences and the curriculum and the emphasis at Deoband became almost fully focused on the transmitted sciences. It is no surprise in this context that Ṭayyab sought to reemphasize the intellectual dimension of the Deobandi heritage by focusing on Nānautvī as a model for the revival and flourishing of Islam in the modern age.

As an exposition of Nānautvī’s intellectual project and his place in the larger narrative of the struggle between revelation and rationality in the Islamic intellectual tradition, Hikmat al-

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Qāsimīyyah deserves closer scrutiny. Ṭayyab begins the work with an exposition of the meaning of religion (dīn) and its relation to faith (īmān) and practice (ʿamal):

Religion is the combination of faith and practice. From faith, practice gets its existence, and from practice, faith is strengthened—just as a seed gives existence to the branches and flowers of a tree and then as the branches grow and spread, they strengthen the root and aid its inward growth. Faith is the totality of ʿaqāʾid (beliefs) and submission (islām) is the totality of practices, and the totality of both is religion. Faith, like the root, is hidden in the depths of the heart and can be seen by the eye of the intellect (ʿaql) and insight (baṣīra) and submission is spread out like the branches and flowers on the horizon and can be seen with the eye of the head.119

In this passage, Ṭayyab begins to explain the significance and relation of faith and actions and how the former is only perceived through the intellect and insight, while the latter are empirically verifiable. He continues that it is the tenets of faith that are the basis for the validity of actions and without the right belief, even the best of actions can be nullified. Furthermore, the truth or falsity of a religion can be judged through its beliefs. The basis for this judgment is whether these beliefs contradict reason and whether they can be traced back to the origins of the religion.120

This is why it is so important, argues Ṭayyab, for a believer to develop insight and to reflect upon his religion and its laws and to be firm in them “with proofs (dalāʾīl) and seeking the truth (ḥaqīqat shināsī).”121 He elaborates that if one’s beliefs are just based on hearsay or are inherited without any self-verification (tahqīq) or understanding, then even if this be called faith, it is not

119 Ṭayyab, Ḥikmat al-Qāsimiyya, 5.
120 As we will see in later chapters, Ṭayyab derives these specific criteria for evaluating religions from Nānautvī, who used the principle of non-contradiction between revelation and reason and based the authenticity of a religious belief or report on an unbroken chain back to the sources of the religion. He used both these criteria, the second derived specifically from the Islamic claims of alteration (tahrīf) of scripture and religion in subsequent history and the hadith methodology of sound chains of narration, against Christian missionaries.
121 Ṭayyab, Ḥikmat al-Qāsimiyyah, 6.
true faith (ḥaqīqat-i īmān). He adds: “On this basis, scholars who are verifiers of truth (muḥaqiq ‘ulama) have discussed this matter in detail whether imitative belief (īmān-i taqlīdī) which is not supported by any demonstrative proof or insight but is inherited from one’s forefathers is valid or trustworthy at all. One group has held that imitative belief is not trustworthy until it has, through proof and understanding, become verified (tahqiqī).”\textsuperscript{122} This differentiation here between self-verification and blind imitation by Ṭayyab has a rich history in Islamic thought and has played a central role in Islamic philosophy and philosophical theology. It is used to highlight the individual’s role in verification and realization of knowledge through one’s own intellect and heart and not on the basis of imitation of others.\textsuperscript{123} It stresses how the intelligence is the true path to knowledge, not merely transmission, and even the truths given through revelation need to be verified through personal understanding. Even though he does not use this terminology, this can be seen as a central dimension of Nānautvī’s intellectual project: to understand Islamic beliefs and practices not through an imitative, rather an intellectually verifiable lens and to present these rational foundations for Islam in the public sphere.

It is on this basis, Ṭayyab argues, that the Qur’an invites the reader to reflection and contemplation, of which the Companions of the Prophet were living exemplars in that despite the presence of the Prophet among them, their faith was self-verified in their hearts, and not only imitative. Quoting a number of Qur’anic verses, Ṭayyab argues that the basis of faith, whether taken as faith as such or faith in specific objects (of faith), is founded upon insight and self-verification. It is only on this basis, he states, that a hadith such as “be wary of the discernment (firāsa) of the person of faith (mūʾmin) for he sees with the light of God”\textsuperscript{124} can be properly

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} For an insightful discussion of this distinction between tahqīq and taqlīd and the paucity of the former in modern Muslim thought, see William Chittick, \textit{Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul} (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).
\textsuperscript{124} This hadith can be found in \textit{Sunan al-Tirmidhī}.  

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understood. Thus, in the person of faith, insight, discernment, and the light of God, exist by necessity. It is this faith that is the fruit of intellectual and spiritual verification that the Qur’an calls to through the use of variant terminology. It is also this verified faith that is unshakeable, states Ṭayyab, as can be seen in how the Companions and early generations (salaf) were completely unmoved in their faith through the harshest persecution, torture, and trials.

From this discussion of the theoretical and Qur’anic basis of the significance of a faith that is intellectually and rationally verified, Ṭayyab moves into the history of the relationship between religion (naql) and reason (ʿaql) or more specifically, the transmitted and intellectual sciences in the Islamic community, from the Prophetic era to the contemporary period. In the Prophet Muḥammad’s time, argues Ṭayyab, his companions did not have to connect religion (naql) with intellect (ʿaql) because proximity to revelation, the Prophet’s presence, and their own pure hearts and minds, already would take them to the highest level of certainty and insight into the revelation. Thus, there was no reason to find intellectual supports for religious ideas and practices. Their faith already possessed a fine balance between self-verification, the intellect, and transmission.

But, Ṭayyab continues, as the era of prophethood became further and further removed in time, rationalistic speculations started to create crises (fitna) of doubt by putting the deficient or worldly reason (ʿaql-i nārsā) ahead of Divine revelation (waḥy-yī ilāhī). This began creating obstacles to the acceptance of revelation by testing the certainty of ordinary Muslims in the beliefs given through revelation. Thus, it became necessary that insight be revived in the faiths of people through intellectual proofs using the pure intellect (ʿaql-i ṣāfī) and those creating doubts.

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125 Technically, naql means transmission, not religion. But in the binary ʿaql/naql, often what is being opposed to each other is revelation and reason; so naql is acting as a code word for what we would today describe as religion. This is why I will use variant renderings to translate this word depending on the context.
be refuted. The original skeptics focused on the principles of religion (ʿusūl al-dīn) by using philosophical language to distort or refute these principles. Ṭayyab states that the same intellect that was sent to the world as a servant of revelation was being misused to abuse revelation. It was thus transformed into a rebellious intellect (bāghīʿ aql) that created numerous dissenting and false sects such as the Rawāfiḍ, the Khawārij, the Qādiriyya, the Jabriyya, and the Muʿtazila. Here, Ṭayyab is describing the emergent theological movements debating questions that emerged from the early crises facing the nascent Muslim community such as civil war and the religious questions that arose from it including free will and determination, justice and wrongdoing, the marks of belief and disbelief, and the nature of God. As a response, Ṭayyab continues, the early salaf began to elaborate on the rationality of the principles of religion in light of wisdom (ḥikmat); in doing this, they were only revealing and opening up what was already contained in revelation, not something new. The use of ħikmat, the Urdu rendering of ħikma, in this and later passage demonstrates that Ṭayyab interprets it firstly as a Qurʾanic term and inherent in revelation which is then brought out by succeeding groups of those who defend or expoit revelation in terms of reason or combine the intelligence and revelation in a mutually illuminating way, such as philosophical theologians, philosophical Sufis, and later philosophers. Ḥikmat, for Ṭayyab, is thus not a science that Muslims have borrowed from the Greeks or concocted themselves but is contained in revelation and like other sciences such as jurisprudence or spirituality, has to be exposed and elaborated when the need arises.127

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126 This is a common pejorative term for Shi`ites in Sunni literature denoting their status as ‘refusers’ of the first caliphs and authentic authority. Polemics with Shi`ism, especially due to the rise of Shi`i power in South Asia with the decline of the Mughals, were a central concern for many Sunni scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See S.A.A. Rizvi, Shah `Abd al-Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics, and Jihad (Canberra: Ma`rifat Publishing House, 1982).

127 Compare the following thesis of Nasr, which seeks to explain why the later Sufism of Ibn al-`Arabī was more articulated and theoretical than the simpler writings of earlier Sufis: “Now, the need for explanation does not increase with one’s knowledge; rather, it becomes necessary to the extent that one is ignorant and has lost the
Ṭayyab continues his narrative of the struggle of rationalists and skeptics with those who used the intelligence to understand, not diminish, revelation with a sequence of crises, each needing a new response. The crisis that emerged after the early development of dissenting theological groups was brought by groups that sought not to cast doubt on the foundations of religion as earlier groups had but on its branches (furūʿ)\(^ {128}\). As a response to these groups, which Ṭayyab does not identify by name but who likely include the more philosophically-minded Muʿtazilis, there arose kalām through Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī and Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīḍī, the founders of the two principal schools of Sunni kalām “who, in light of the divine revelation, strongly challenged philosophy and dressed beliefs and [religious] issues in vestments of the intellect and presented then before the world.”\(^ {129}\) He adds that although these groups did not disappear, they were reduced to being sects (firqa) cut off from the main body of the Muslim community. In addition, bringing the discussion to its original thesis of the necessity of faith to be informed and animated by the intellect, Ṭayyab states that these kalāmī arguments resulted “in an increase of the insightfulness in the faith of the faithful.”\(^ {130}\) The next crisis, according to Ṭayyab, was when rationalistic and “philosophically-minded” groups, after losing the battle on the field of beliefs (ʿaqāʾid), turned to the general precepts of Islam by sowing discord and casting aspersions. This next response came from the “masters of ḥikmat and gnosis” who came forward and discoursed on the general and universal precepts of Islam according to hikma and the intellect. Ṭayyab names among these masters such figures as al-Rāzī, al-Ghazālī, al-Khaṭābī, ʿIzz al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd

\(^{128}\) Ṭayyab here is utilizing the classical division between the principles of religion (uṣūl) which pertain to theological beliefs and the branches (furūʿ), which refer to particular practices.

\(^{129}\) Ṭayyab, Ḥikmat al-Qāsimiyya, 11.

\(^{130}\) Ibid.
al-Salām, and Ibn al-ʿArabī, whom he refers to as a gnostic. Their effort also resulted in the refutation of philosophy, by which Ṭayyab means the Peripatetic philosophers who were criticized by al-Ghazālī in his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* and relating revelation directly to the intelligence by al-Rāzī in his Qur’anic commentary, which cemented the genre of intellectual exegesis (tafsīr bi-l-maʿqūl). More significantly, these masters also opened up countless hidden secrets, or dimensions, (makhfī asrār) of the religion and laid the foundations for all future intellectual discourse about religion.

The next crisis was not in the principles of religious precepts but in their branches, or more concretely, in the field of jurisprudence (fiqh). Skeptics began to criticize the rulings of the ‘ulama’ and accused them of being against reason and analogy (qiyās). Ṭayyab, no doubt aware that this criticism of the ‘ulama’ was quite widespread in his own time, gives here perhaps his most definitive statement on the relation of revelation and the intellect:

> The total intellect (ʿaql-i kullī) runs through this religion of primordial nature (dīn-i fītrat) as its very spirit (rūḥ) … and it has brought with it the light of the sound intellect and it contains such jewels of comprehension, insight, intelligence, and discernment that can … expose [the falsity of] pretentious rationalists and unexamined religions.¹³¹

Ṭayyab makes this remark to show that even the minutiae of jurisprudential rulings have intellectual foundations because they pertain to revelation which contains the highest secrets of knowledge. He continues to state that this became evident when rational (ʿaqlí) proofs came to be furnished in works of jurisprudence alongside transmitted (naqlí) proofs such as in the *Hidāya*, the most widely used book of Hanafī jurisprudence in South Asia and other works. From this time onwards, continues Ṭayyab, asrār-i dīn, literally ‘the secrets of religion’, or more

¹³¹ Ibid., 13.
precisely, the rational and inner meanings of religious precepts, became a constant subject
(mawḍūʿ) for Muslim scholars and in every Islamic discipline, rational proofs came to be
furnished in order to defend it against detractors. Yet these intellectual proofs regarding different
aspects of religion came to be collected over time in the different disciplines concerned with
them. They did not come to constitute a discipline (fann) of their own—a rational apologetics
that covered all domains of religion. Similarly, the detractors also did not develop a particular
discipline but only specific criticisms in specific disciplines. Thus, although investigation of the
deeper meaning of religion became a subject, it did not become a discipline.

This changed, however, states Ṭayyab, with the providential work of Shāh Waļī Allāh at a time
when Europe was beginning to rise and Muslim India had begun to change. Even before the
advent of European influence, rationalism and individualism was beginning to emerge in South
Asia, which would prepare the way for the coming age of modernity. At this time, with his inner
discernment (firāsat-i bāṭinī), Waļī Allāh was able to perceive the danger and respond. Among
the groups emergent at his time were what Ṭayyab calls neo-Muʿtazilis who would make
revelation completely subject to reason, refusing to believe in any precepts of the shariʿa without
rational proof, and rejecting those unseen (ghaybī) beliefs that cannot be known through the
senses. Furthermore, doubts against the normative interpretations of religion were accumulating
and in danger of becoming a discipline. In response, Waļī Allāh asserted that the whole of
religion needed to be explained rationally and intellectually. For this, he wrote his master work
Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha, which turned the intellectual and rational exposition of religion into a
specific discipline, explaining its principles and goals. Furthermore, with Waļī Allāh’s method,
one need not counter rationalists by becoming a rationalist oneself, but by “becoming a man of
Although Ģayyab does not elaborate this, Walī Allāh’s perspective incorporated all the principal modes of knowledge, revelation, the intellect, and spiritual understanding and experience, so that becoming a man of God did not mean rejecting rationality but embracing it without glorifying it above other modes of knowledge.

Ġayyab finally arrives at the final crisis, a monumental one in which European colonialism takes over the Muslim world and India, bringing with it modern philosophy and modern science. Modern science produced the age of machines where all of life was overwhelmed by its power. Furthermore, modern science opened up the secrets of matter and developed an empirical method to uncover these previously hidden realities. He describes the fundamental change brought by this modern world:

The discoveries of modern philosophy and modern science were founded upon observation and demonstration (mushāhadat), the world passed from an intellectual framework of things rationally known to one dominated by things empirically known; thus, naturally a revolution occurred regarding previous intellectual perspectives.¹³³

Ġayyab here is describing the transition from the rationalism dominant in earlier phases of modernity to the increasing empiricism of later modernity.¹³⁴ This has resulted in a new challenge for religion, which must now not only be demonstrated through rational means but empirical means. It is at this juncture, Ģayyab describes in strongly hagiographic language, that Nānautvī providentially emerged:

¹³² Ibid., 16.
¹³³ Ibid., 17-18.
¹³⁴ This can be seen, for example, in comparing the definitive rationalism of Descartes, who places the origin of all knowledge in the mind of human beings, to Kant, from whom philosophy becomes a handmaiden of modern science.
So, at the beginning of this century, through the grace and power of the Truth—Exalted be He—was sent the sun of religion, the proof of God on earth, his presence Mawlānā Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī—may his secret be sanctified—founder of Dār al-ʿUlūm Deoband, as a healer to cure the empiricist maladies of this age and reformer of the umma, who, through his speeches and writings, subjected the minds of scientifically- and empirically-minded people through their ways of thinking and began the correction of such minds.135

He continues with his description of the methodology of Nānautvī, which he calls the Ḥikmat-i Qāsimīyya:

All the parts of the Ḥikmat-i Qāsimīyya (which are scattered throughout his [Nānautvī’s] works) have at once shed the light of clear and deep intellectual proofs on the truths of Islam, and with full force have demonstrated these truths with the modern era’s empirical observations and perspectives.136

Nānautvī, states Ṭayyab, has made the central truths of the Islamic religion—its metaphysics, cosmology, and principles—seem natural (tabīʿī) and primordial (fiṭrī) in accordance with the perspective of the modern age. Furthermore, Ṭayyab argues, Nānautvī did not want to force these truths upon people; rather, he wanted to demonstrate that all these beliefs and obligations of the Islamic religion are in accordance with the natural disposition of human beings. Key here, he continues, is Nānautvī’s presentation of Islam not as merely a rational religion (dīn-i ʿaqlī) but as the Qur’an calls it, dīn-i fiṭrat, the original religion that humans are naturally predisposed to.

Ṭayyab states that Nānautvī’s knowledge, which he explicated in his works, was not derived from books, but was divinely-bestowed (laduni).137 This claim is part of Ṭayyab’s broader argument that Nānautvī’s knowledge was neither bookish nor rationalistic, but derived from a

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135 Ṭayyab, Ḥikmat al-Qāsimīyya, 18.
136 Ibid., 18-19.
137 Here, as in the passage quoted above when Ṭayyab introduces Nānautvī with the phrase “may his secret be sanctified” (quddus sirruh), often reserved for Sufi saints, the Sufi dimension of Nānautvī should be noted. Nānautvī was not only a Sufi master, his works are also influenced by the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī, though his often rational mode of discourse can prevent the reader from discerning the Sufi ideas in his work.
higher intellect. Ṭayyab quotes Nānautvī’s contemporary scholar and fellow townsman Muḥammad Yaʿqūb Nānautvī describing the former’s intellectual methodology:

[Nānautvī’s] mind was naturally inclined to wisdom, so that, without his choosing, the things that came to his mind were those connected with *ḥikma*; in his perspective, even particular matters became universal and could be used to understand and solve not only that particular matter but countless others because he would unlock the universal principle inherent in the particular…¹³⁸

This quotation illustrates well Nānautvī’s penchant for using particulars to illumine universals and being able to find universal meanings in each and every particular. On this note, Ṭayyab mentions how, for Nānautvī, every jurisprudential problem had a rational meaning and there was no case which cannot be used for purposes of analogy (*qiyās*). Giving an example from Nānautvī, Ṭayyab states that laughing breaking the ablution (*wudu’*) is seen as non-rational by most jurists, whereas Nānautvī gave rational reasons for it. The deeper principle behind this, argues Nānautvī, is that particulars are born of universals and since every universal is capable of being known intellectually, particulars cannot be non-rational and thus unknowable. Nānautvī’s method, Ṭayyab states, was to take a particular issue of religion, such as a Sharʿī precept, and then point this particular to its universal principle and then to derive from this principle many other particulars and goals of religion (*maqāṣid-i dīn*). This method is particularly visible in those works and discourses of Nānautvī such as *Ḥujjat al-Islām*¹³⁹, where he is dealing with the rational and deeper meanings of religious acts, such as the observances associated with the shariʿa. Furthermore, states Ṭayyab, Nānautvī surprisingly did not only think that religious commands (*ahkām*) had rational meanings as others have, but that reports (*akhbār*) and events also could be shown to be rationally comprehensible. Specifically, every event connected with

¹³⁹ See Nānautvī, *Ḥujjat al-Islam* (Deoband: 1967), Ch. 4.
revelation has intellectual foundations, because nothing that can be related to the shariʿa in its widest sense can be without reason. Furthermore, since all of creation consists of the acts of God and nothing can be more natural than God’s acts, everything in the cosmos can be explained as natural (tabīʿī) and ‘scientific’ according to Ṭayyab’s interpretation, in addition to being rational.

In Ṭayyab’s narrative, then, Nānautvī emerges as the man of the moment, the one who brings renewal (tajdīd) at a time of crisis by responding to the challenges of the times in their own language through the combination of rational and empirical proofs and the utilization of the language and methods of the philosophers and the scientists. All this is in service of demonstrating that Islam is not only the most rational religion but is also the most natural one. Ṭayyab sees Nānautvī’s audience as firstly modernizing Muslims and attests to his own experience of speaking with modern college graduates who have been revolutionized in their understanding of religion by reading Nānautvī. Secondarily, his work is also useful for non-Muslims, states Ṭayyab, for even if they did not accept Islam, the sophistication of Nānautvī’s arguments were such that something of the truth would become established in them. Thirdly, he also mentions superficial people, even among the ‘ulama’, who are threatened by Nānautvī because they are unable to understand him; Ṭayyab is likely referring to the growing ranks within religious actors today who are opposed to the intellectual sciences in general. Ṭayyab asserts that it is only the Ḥikmat-i Qāsimiyya that can answer the challenge of modernity, materialism, and atheism that plagues us today by bringing out the deeper principles inherent in all Islamic beliefs and practices and thereby demonstrate their validity and truth. After a discussion of various scholars and theologians influenced by Nānautvī, Ṭayyab ends with the keen observation that what is presented in the language of mysticism in Shāh Wali Allāh, is
presented through rationality and demonstration in Nānautvī and thus, Nānautvī represents the completion of Wali Allāh’s religio-intellectual project along rational and empirical lines.

**The Emergence of the Public Sphere in Colonial India**

The concept of the public sphere is central to understanding the specific context of interreligious polemics and rational justifications of religion in colonial South Asia. This concept, which has a long tradition in European thought, was most influentially explicated by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, beginning with his classic work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, English trans., 1989). While Habermas’ theory builds on the initial European experience of modernity and particularly the rise of the bourgeoisie to explain the emergence of the public sphere as a space between the official and governmental sphere and the sphere of private affairs, the spread of modernity through colonialism and the emergence of the Western world system resulted in non-Western societies, such as the Islamic and South Asian, undergoing processes paralleling the European experience. In the context of colonial South Asia, public arenas of discourse can be seen to emerge through several different factors, including the introduction of print, the spread of modern forms of education, social mobilization through new forms of collective identities, and the emergence of religion as an identity marker. Specific British policies and attitudes towards South Asian religious traditions as well as Christian proselytism helped to create a public arena of religious discourse that was mediated neither by the colonial administration nor by any one religious group, but truly represented a novel discourse where differing perspectives came together to debate and discuss their ideas.
Habermas’ notion of the public sphere dates it as a specifically modern development; he categorically states that there was no “public sphere as a unique realm distinct from the private sphere”\textsuperscript{140} in medieval Europe. Others, such as the authors represented in the edited by Hoexter et al, \textit{The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies}\textsuperscript{141}, trace various versions of a public sphere to pre-modern Muslim societies. Whatever the case might be, the modern public sphere, emerging in modern Europe, is undoubtedly a specifically modern phenomenon, whether one relates it to the Enlightenment project, like Habermas, or does not, as many of his critics. Habermas traces the emergence of a reasoning public to the new spaces created in eighteenth-century Europe. James Gordon Finlayson summarizes Habermas’ argument:

\begin{quote}
At the beginning of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the establishment of civic rights guaranteeing the individual freedoms of association and expression and the emergence of a free press gave rise to physical spaces such as coffee houses and salons and to literary journals, in which citizens could enter into free public discussion. They were fora in which they voluntarily came together and participated as equals in public debates. These arenas were autonomous in two senses: participation in them was voluntary, and they were relatively independent of the economic and political systems.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

While the language of this passage is applicable principally to the European context and bears a strong liberal interpretation of the public sphere, the parallels in development of such a public sphere in colonial India are nonetheless significant. There is the emergence of a public space into which individuals or groups voluntarily enter in order to discuss and debate, whether through speech or writing, in order to argue for a public good. This public sphere might be loosely regulated by the colonial government but the government did not participate in it. It became the

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\textsuperscript{141} Miriam Hoexter et al, eds., \textit{The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).
\end{flushright}
site where Indians could articulate their own ideas and interests, and debate them with other Indians as well as private British individuals. As far as religious actors are concerned, the British policy not to interfere with the religion of Indians further allowed Muslim and Hindu scholars and religious activists as well as European Christian missionaries to participate in public interactions through debates and writings. These public arenas of discourse, to use Sandra Freitag’s term, thus served as alternative sites where colonial subjects could exert a measure of freedom in freely debating religious and philosophical ideas, including those held by the British themselves, such as Christianity, modern science, and philosophy. Freitag, in an influential study of the emergence of distinct communities in colonial India, describes this realm of public arenas of discourse:

Such a place impinged simultaneously on two worlds—that encompassing activity by locally constituted groups, and that structured by state institutions. Key to both worlds, this realm of public arenas came, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to occupy a unique position in British north India. Originally just the realm in which collective activities were staged, it became an alternative world to that structured by the imperial regime, providing legitimacy and recognition to a range of actors and values denied place in the imperial order.

Dietrich Reetz argues that Muslim revivalists played a major role in the development of multiple public arenas of discourse in colonial India in the early nineteenth century. Their attempt to define normative public and personal practice of Islam spawned the evolution of public structures and modes of communication. Whereas previously, Muslim rulers had provided the public setting for public definitions of Islam, now, with the end of Muslim rule, the ‘ulama’, and

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143 We will look at these debates in more length in Chapters 3 and 4.
Muslim reformers became the de facto agents of defining normative Muslim belief and practice. This, they mostly did by establishing a public discourse, through print, mobilization, debates, and public speeches, drawing on the Qur’an, the Prophet, and early exemplars to substitute for the institutions and structures previously provided by the Muslim state. By looking at the discourse of Nānautvī, as well as various Muslim modernists like Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, one can argue, however, that a return to the textual sources was not the only option available to Muslims. Muslim revivalists were concerned almost wholly with the Muslim community, its betterment and reform; whereas Nānautvī, Khān, and others, had a broader goal: to enable Islam and Muslims to be a significant voice in the larger Indian society by appealing not just to Muslims but to Hindus, Christians, as well as those that identified with modern science and philosophy. This, Nānautvī did by eschewing a public theology based on scriptural sources and instead formulating one based on intelligence and rationality.

As a discourse neither rooted in nor controlled by either the state or specific confessional perspectives, the participants in the South Asian polemics and apologetics of the late 19th century had to devise new ways of formulating and presenting their religious traditions. The relatively secure places of discussion within traditional discourses, in which participants all spoke variants of the same language and shared a set of givens, had now had to exist alongside a broader intellectual arena where the participants did not necessarily share givens or speak the same conceptual language. In this situation, in order for any real conversation to occur, such bases of mutual understanding had to be established. This was the situation that Nānautvī addressed when he decided to participate both personally and through his writings in interreligious polemics and apologetics. Two tools he used to address the new situation was recourse to the language and

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methods of rationality, and knowledge of his opponent’s traditions. It should be noted that Nānautvī’s basing himself in the hikma tradition meant that he was also utilizing a form of rationality different from that of the modern West. This also differentiated him from Muslim modernists such as his rival Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, who attempted to adapt nineteenth-century British empiricism to Islamic discourses.

In this discussion regarding rationality, Habermas’ later work regarding communicative action and rationality as an inherent aspect of public discourse becomes significant. In her classic work, Islamic Revival in British India, Barbara Metcalf has portrayed the interreligious debates of North India in the latter half of the nineteenth century as more spectacle and less serious theological discussion. He has also reflected on how these debates served as self-validation for the participants involved and did not represent a real contribution to dialogue of the issues that divided religious communities.¹⁴⁶ Though there is a measure of truth in her observations, they also do not fully represent what a theologian like Nānautvī was doing when he participated in these debates and thus, need to be balanced by a more sophisticated manner of understanding the nature of the emergent public sphere in colonial India. To do this, we may turn to Habermas’ understanding of discourse and the public sphere. The division constructed during colonial rule between what Habermas calls the sphere of public authority, in other words, the state, and the private sphere also paved the way for the emergence of a third sphere that can be called the public sphere which mediated between the other two. Here, private groups of individuals congregated to debate and discuss issues of common interest. According to Habermas, discourse occurs only where there are points of contention, otherwise there would be mutually agreed actions and no need for discussion. Discourse, thus is not merely language or speech but a

¹⁴⁶ Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India, 215-234.
technical term for “a reflective form of speech that aims at reaching a rationally motivated consensus.” Discourse is always aimed at reaching a rationally driven consensus whether such a consensus is forthcoming or not. Furthermore, this mode of discourse for Habermas is the default mechanism for the regulation of everyday conflict in the modern world and not just one language game among others. This is partially due to the reason that modern societies are built on the understanding that anyone can be asked to justify their action and is pre-committed to do so. Rationality is thus part of the way social order is regulated.

Applying these observations to Nānautvī, it is clear that the intention in his works was to argue with his interlocutors and convince them on the basis of a mutually shared rationality that his arguments in support of Islam as a religion that can be fully rationally justified (as opposed to Christianity and Hinduism) are compelling. The nature of the emergent public sphere that he was operating in also provided him with the opportunity to respond to public criticisms of Islam and to generate a discourse in which Islam could be viewed as a religion that could appeal to any person who relied on his or her sound reason, instead of unreflective acceptance of tradition or fuzzy thinking. Nānautvī’s attempts to justify the Islamic religious tradition in the emergent public sphere was significant in generating a discourse that goes on into the contemporary period about the place of religion in general, and Islam in particular, in South Asian public life. In this light, the interreligious debates of the late nineteenth century can be seen as central to formulating central questions and determining modes of conflict and dialogue between religious traditions in South Asia and in generating public awareness of and ongoing public concern with questions related to religious and ethical issues.

Furthermore, the quest for a voice and for equality for the Muslim community at a time when they had declined from being the rulers of much of the Indian subcontinent to being an increasingly marginalized community in a pluralist context, was addressed by Nānautvī, as by others in different ways. That Nānautvī could debate and refute Christian missionaries, seen as representing colonial British encroachment on Indian culture and religion, as well as Hindus, seeking a similar voice and equality, no doubt helped to revive the confidence of his fellow Muslims in their own religious beliefs and practices. Here, one can also apply Foucault’s observation of the intimate connection between knowledge and power.

Nānautvī can be seen as the founder of a new form of Muslim apologetics in the modern era, one that relied not on the language of scripture, even though it was grounded in it, but in the language of rationality culled from the hikma tradition that combined philosophy, theology, and doctrinal Sufism. The purpose of such a discourse was to present Islam as the most rational and natural way of understanding the world and the role of humans in it. By doing so, Nānautvī wanted to both respond to and convince critics of Islam, and also to introduce modernizing Muslims to a way of approaching their religion which does not create a dichotomy between religious tradition and the new knowledge associated with modern science and philosophy that the British had introduced. He wanted to argue for a vision in which revelation and reason would not be opposed, as they were becoming for modernized Indians, but would work to confirm one another.
Nānautvī’s Philosophical Theology in *Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr*

Let us now turn to the work that perhaps best illustrates Nānautvī’s rational and philosophical theology, his *Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr* (The Heart-Pleasing Discourse). This is his chief work of philosophical theology and a broad rational defense of the Islamic understanding of God, the cosmos, and the human being, as well as of more specific Islamic principles and practices, demonstrating most directly the methodology that undergirds his work in general.

He begins this treatise by emphasizing the primacy of the human intellect over all things, showing how it is the intellect that distinguishes human beings and it is by the intellect that they are able to discriminate. He states:

> After bestowing countless blessings [upon human beings, God] gave [human beings] the greatest of all bestowals- that which gives [them] primacy over all of creation. What was this? A priceless gem, an intellect pure. This discriminates between truth and falsehood, good and evil, benefit and loss, as the spark of a fire, or light of the moon, the sun, or the stars distinguishes black and white, yellow and red, width and length, beauty and ugliness.148

This correspondence between intellect and light, recalling a likeness often used in the Illuminationist school widely known in India, is used by Nānautvī in this and other works to highlight the intellect as the instrument that can distinguish, discriminate, and guide the human being in the face of uncertainty or the existence of multiple claims to truth, just as light illuminates, guides, and gives us the ability to distinguish between the multiple objects we behold. It is the greatest of all the gifts that God has bestowed on human beings.

Nānautvī follows the passage above with a description of the existence of indefinite diversity in the things of the world and how this diversity itself is a testament to the contingency of things

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and the creative omnipotence of God. As there are indefinite types of things in the world, there are indefinite categories of the intellect manifest in different human beings, some bestowed with more wisdom and others with less. The task of the former is to guide the latter. This concern with accounting for difference is a point that Nānautvī continues to come back to in this work.

Nānautvī follows up this initial description of the intellect with another significant move: a general invitation to people of all religious backgrounds to consider the ideas that he is putting forth in this book:

…to every Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Zoroastrian, by way of good will, I collect and present a few scattered reflections and I hope that everyone will separate themselves from sectarian and religious biases and attachments to received beliefs and give a fair listen to what I have to say. If you like what I have to say, then accept it. If not, then correct it.149

This manner of addressing peoples of other religions specifically, instead of Muslims or human beings in general as was normative in pre-modern Islamic literature, is striking and is reflective of the new interreligious public space of colonial India. It also reveals the newfound possibility of public platforms through which he could widely address members of other religious communities, whereas earlier Muslim scholars would have not been able to do so. It is also important to connect this appeal that Nānautvī is making to peoples of all religious communities with the topic he opened the book with, intelligence. It is precisely through this shared human capacity for reason that human beings are able to reflect and to overcome biases and attachments in light of the truth, even when a climate of intolerance prevails as mentioned. It is also the instrument through which all can participate in a shared discussion, which Nānautvī hoped to elicit.

149 Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 24.
A key aspect of Nānautvī’s philosophical epistemology is his self-reflexivity, which enables him specifically to appeal to a modern audience. This epistemology allows him to situate the root of knowledge in the reflection and experience of the self and not in an external source, whether that be nature, as it is in the natural sciences, or in texts, as it is often in the religious sciences. Nānautvī offers a self-reflexive narrative of the particular intellectual difficulty that he found himself in and the means to its solution, which further reveal the building blocks of his natural theology and its basis in reason. He describes:

No matter who you observe in the world, they have a different perspective, way, and custom. This is why there is so much divergence among human beings [lit. the children of Adam] that it cannot be expressed. Against the unity of kind and species and because of these differences, [they are] bloodthirsty towards one another. After seeing this, reason ['aql nārsā] became utterly perplexed as to who to consider correct and who wrong. Sometimes, I thought that perhaps everyone is correct and sometimes I thought that perhaps everyone is wrong, and sometimes that neither is everyone correct nor is everyone wrong. Some are correct, others wrong. But then, even with this I would become dissatisfied. My constant search remained: if someone is correct, who is it? And if someone is incorrect, who is it?  

In this autobiographical passage, Nānautvī raises a basic epistemological question: how does one know the truth since human beliefs and paths are so many? Being bewildered at this diversity, which, in his observation, leads both to alienation and conflict despite the unity of humanity, Nānautvī searched for a method by which to ascertain who is right and who is wrong. But because at first he was relying only on his worldly reason, he was frustrated.

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150 For a further discussion of this epistemology and its connection to Nānautvī’s metaphysics, see Ch. 4.
151 As we saw above with Ṭayyab, Nānautvī distinguishes between a pure or higher intellect, which he refers to simply as ‘aql or ‘aql sālim, sound intellect, and a worldly or lower intellect, which he refers to as ‘aql nārsā, and which is closer to the term reason as it is used today. In Nānautvī’s usage, the former is open to metaphysics and therefore, the principal matters addressed through revelation, while the second is only able to operate by the logic of this world and is thereby cut off from revelation.
152 Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 24.
In the remainder of the passage, Nānautvī begins by describing his difficulties in finding the right path or rather even knowing what is right or true. He continues to state that he reflected on how, even in the physical realm, for every ailment, there is a cure, relying on the idiom “he who seeks, finds”, and the hope that an answer could be found was born in him. This answer was to be found in the intellect, which alone possessed the capacity to distinguish between truth and falsehood:

From the Unseen (ghayb), it came into my heart that the gem (or essence) of intellect and wisdom which has been bestowed in greater or lesser measure upon every human being has been granted precisely for the purpose of distinguishing the truth from falsehood and recognizing good and evil.¹⁵³

Drawn from the intellect, this certainty that dawned on Nānautvī’s heart, from which the book gets its name as a “heart-pleasing discourse”, resolved his doubts. And in the format of this treatise, it serves as the starting point from which his further explorations of a natural theology built upon a rational foundation is developed.¹⁵⁴

Nānautvī begins to build his natural theology by first posing the question: “Is there a creator of this world, one who, after creating it, also maintains it, or is it like the materialists (dahriyya)¹⁵⁵,

¹⁵³ Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 25. It might be fruitful to compare Nānautvī’s intellectual quest with that of al-Ghazālī, who describes his intellectual and spiritual journey in detail in his autobiography Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl (Deliverance from Error). While Al-Ghazālī’s journey begins with a similar question (how does one come to know the truth?), his journey takes him from knowledge that one receives culturally to the dogmatic knowledge found in theology to rational knowledge found in philosophy, finally to arrive at the experienced knowledge, that which he calls dhawq, taste, found in Sufism. Nānautvī seems to embark on a similar quest for knowledge and is illumined from the Unseen just as al-Ghazālī but his ending point seems to be that of asserting the primacy of the intellect, not as the mere speculative rationality of the philosophers al-Ghazālī critiqued, but as the faculty that can provide certain knowledge. See Al-Ghazālī, Deliverance from Error. As will be discussed in Ch. 4, Nānautvī’s notion of the intellect, following the school of Shiraz, was grounded in the idea of wujūd, existence, and therefore, was quite distinct from modern Western forms of rationality.

¹⁵⁵ This term has also come to be used for atheists in Urdu.
‘a self-generating and self-regulating factory’?156 His answer, loosely based on the classical design argument, posits that the diversity of the world, the constant change and flux of the states of all that exist within it, and the constant deficiency, humiliation, and lack of control over the states that all things in it go through due to constant change or decline, point to the existence of a creator that brings this change and diversity into being. Moreover, he subjects all beings, especially the highest of them, human beings, to His rule so that, observing the deficiencies of this world, they recognize and seek its creator.

He follows up with an interesting argument tailored for a lay audience. He states that when there is a disagreement, those with comprehension trust their own comprehension, those who do not understand look to those that comprehend and are intelligent, and when there are different perspectives among the intelligent, they look to see towards which perspective a greater number turn. Nānautvī states that he himself relies on this method, and if one was to rely on it, it would be easy to see the lack of comprehension demonstrated by materialists and atheists. He states: “From young to old, Hindu, Muslim, Christian [lit. English], Jew, idol worshippers, Zoroastrians [lit. fire worshippers], whoever you may want to observe, firmly believes that we have a Creator, whose creation we are;”157 even the assemblies and councils of the world recognize this. Here, we see Nānautvī making a pragmatic argument, an appeal to the authority of the consensus or majority opinion of human beings, especially those who are knowledgeable, but in principle, everyone. Nānautvī recognizes that the materialist or atheist position becoming popular in his time due to modern science and empiricism is an anomalous position that the majority of the world’s population does not hold; no matter what their particular beliefs, practically everyone believes in a creator or designer of the world.

156 Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 25.
157 Ibid., 29.
Nānautvī states that those who deny God’s existence make the empirical argument that we are unable to see a creator or designer, and therefore, He does not exist. He counters that a sign or indication of the existence of something points to its existence, and if it was necessary to see something to attest to its reality, then why does everyone believe that there is a fire if he sees smoke rising from behind a wall, or that the sun has risen when he sees sunlight from out of his window, or that someone has passed on a road if there are footsteps? Nānautvī, in this and other works, peppers his prose with everyday examples that those among the laity reading his work would be able to understand. When Ṭayyab spoke above of the empirical or natural bent of Nānautvī’s methodology, in addition to his philosophical foundations, he may as well have meant Nānautvī’s penchant for using examples from ordinary life to illustrate metaphysical and theological truths.

Once Nānautvī has established the idea that all religions and groups, except materialists, believe in the existence of God, he states that one can follow this argument and show that they all also agree that God is one. But this, he states, does not seem to be accurate when you take into account those Christians who say there are three gods, or those who say that there is a god for good and another for evil,¹⁵⁸ the first called Yazdān, the second Ahrīman, or those that say human beings are the creators of their own acts.¹⁵⁹ All of these groups—Christians, Zoroastrians, Muʿtazilis, and others—seem to posit the existence of multiple gods. If this is so, then how can one state that all agree that God is one? Nānautvī begins unraveling the problem by presenting what he believes is erroneous in all of these beliefs before relating this to the question of God’s oneness.

¹⁵⁸ Nānautvī is here relying on classical kalām works such as those of al-Māturīdī, who begins his discussion of God with the Zoroastrian and Magian belief in a duality of divine principles.
¹⁵⁹ This again is a classical kalāmī argument against the Muʿtazilis, who argued that free will entailed human beings were creators of their own acts, to which the Ashʿarīs responded that God is the ultimate agent for all that occurs, including human actions.
Nānautvī here begins with a criticism of Christian trinitarian beliefs as this is the aspect of Christianity that he argues is the most clearly against reason and furthermore, is against the consensus of the intelligent and the believers of all other religions. Nānautvī’s concern here is not to show in detail what is wrong with trinitarianism but to show why, despite its obvious falsity, Christians continue to hold on to it. The argument is therefore, an argument to account for the failure of reason, a topic he further explores in depth in subsequent chapters regarding the causes of the differences of belief, even when they go against reason.  

In other works, he focuses on criticizing other dimensions of Christianity, such as the idea of original sin and the need for a redeemer; here, his purpose is less to criticize Christianity than to validate his natural and rational theology and methodology. Nonetheless, this passage demonstrates an engagement with the kinds of debates that were occurring between Muslims and Christian missionaries in India and elsewhere in the Muslim world in the colonial era. An interesting dimension of these debates, at least in India, is that Muslim participants sometimes seem to be more aware of modern developments in Europe than Christians themselves, whether this is new forms of biblical interpretation or the rising secularity of European culture.

Nānautvī argues “that assertion which seems to be against reason, no one believes without further proof. However, if the proof is intelligible, then the people of intellect accept it. But that assertion which, without any proof, is sound to the intellect, like two plus two equals four, even a hundred proofs cannot nullify.” He compares this to the difference between seeing something with one’s own eyes and merely hearing of it, again using his favorite example of the sun; no

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160 See Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 188-205. Nānautvī here specifically looks at possible reasons why Christian beliefs in their present form came to be accepted, despite their unverified and irrational nature. He also answers some objections Christians may make to his observations.
161 See Ch. 4 for such an argument in Nānautvī’s Hujjat al-Islām. In Taqrīr Dilpazīr, Nānautvī also criticizes other aspects of Christianity, such as the idea that God can become man.
162 For more on Christian-Muslim debates, see the sections on Christian missionaries in Chs. 3 and especially 4.
163 Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 31.
amount of proof or persuasion can change the mind of one who has witnessed something on the argument of someone who has not. So if Christians say that God is three yet also say God is one, and give no other basis for this belief other than the Gospel and the sayings of their forefathers, on the basis of the intellect, the assertion that one can be three or three can be one is blatantly false and akin to saying that day is night or night is day. But it seems, Nānautvī continues, when it comes to the word of the Gospel, they are unable to listen to anyone else, even their own intellect.

Nānautvī’s next move is to challenge the authenticity of the present version of the New Testament as not the original Injīl, the revelation given to Jesus mentioned in the Qur’an. Although the charge of alteration (tahrīf) of scriptures by the people of scripture (ahl al-kitāb) is one that goes back to the Qur’an and the earliest Muslim-Christian polemics, Nānautvī here is employing it as part of an argument that uses Muslim scholarly methodology, modern biblical exegesis, and rationality. Nānautvī argues that anyone can claim a book is heavenly or is God’s word. But where is the proof if there is no authorizing chain of narrations (sanad) that can be traced back to Jesus? This idea of sanad is central to the transmitted sciences in the Islamic scholarly tradition, especially in hadith studies. And here Nānautvī is applying this as a criterion to authenticate any form of transmitted report such as the transmission of the text of the New Testament. He continues that in order to prove the authenticity of their sacred text, Christians point to the miracles of Jesus and further assert that the miracles also authenticate whatever is in the text, such as the idea of the Trinity. Nānautvī asks: what is the proof that it is the same Injīl that Jesus brought? This must be known intellectually or through sound report and the report has

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164 The word Nānautvī uses, in accordance with the Qur’anic usage, is Injīl, a word that can potentially become a problematic term, as the Muslim understanding of the Gospel as Divine Revelation is different from the Christian understanding of it as the accounts of the life of Jesus.
to be such that the intellect cannot refute it. But there is no *sanad* to verify this. On the contrary, Christian scholars themselves say that the original was in Syriac or Hebrew and from there, it was translated into other languages, the original being lost. Here, Nānautvī is referring to his knowledge of modern biblical criticism at least second hand from such figures as Raḥmat Allāh Kairānvī (1818-1891) who famously debated the Christian scholar and missionary Karl Pfander (1803-1865) in Agra in 1854. Kairānvī was able to win debates with Pfander and other Christians on the basis of knowledge of modern biblical criticism he had received from his assistant, Muḥammad Wazīr Khān, who had lived in London.165 Nānautvī continues that translation is always interpretive and the particularities of the individuals translating can influence the translation. Contingent factors such as ideological interests or careless errors can creep in. This is why translations vary from one another; in fact, Christian ministers themselves have admitted in debates with Muslims, argues Nānautvī, that earlier Christian scholars have altered the text in seven or eight places. These arguments thus show that the authenticity of the present New Testament cannot be substantiated, either through rational means nor through transmission.166

Earlier in the text, Nānautvī had spoken of how the intelligence of Christians was proverbial among the peoples of the world and he was no doubt referring to the developments brought by European modernity. However, if they are so intelligent, how can they believe in something that does not concur with reason or sound transmission? Here, Nānautvī replies that their intelligence should not be doubted; this just proves that they do not apply themselves to matters of theology as they do to the sciences of the world. Their whole attention is focused on the world to the point that going to church once a week is considered religiosity by them. But even then, only a few do.

166 Nānautvī, *Taqrīr Dilpazīr*, 34-36.
If others were to pay the kind of scrupulous attention to science and technology they do, they would equal them, as can already be seen from those Indians who work with them. Here Nānautvī is pointing out that it is not the lack of intelligence that prevents one from seeing the full reality, but a focusing of the intelligence only in one direction, in this case, towards the material world. He ends here with a reminder that in this belief in the Trinity, Christians are on one side and the rest of the world on another, again highlighting the idea of consensus as a source of knowledge. This passage also indicates that Nānautvī is among the first ‘ulama’ to be fully aware of and address the schism in modern European culture between Christianity and modern secular sciences and philosophy.

He continues his criticism of Christian and Vaishnaiva Hindu doctrines with a concise refutation of the idea of God becoming man. This is that the intellect knows without proof that the Creator cannot be dependent on anyone or anything and similarly, human beings cannot but be marked by aspects of contingency, relativity, and indigence (iḥtiyāj). They are controlled by their need for food and drink, their health and disease, and eventual death. Then, how can one rationally assert that Rama, Krishna, Jesus, and Ezra are God or God’s son? He next turns to the other groups accused of denying God’s oneness, beginning with the Muʿtazilis, who claimed themselves to be major unitarians (muwāḥhidīn). Nānautvī’s central critique is that they hold human beings are the creators of their own acts and if God is the creator of all things, this would go against His power and sovereignty as there will now be two or more creators if you add the actions of angels and jinn. The central problem here, Nānautvī argues, is a

167 Ibid., 36-38.
168 Here, he is referencing a cryptic Qur’anic verse (9:30) which censures Jews for calling Ezra a son of God. For an interesting discussion of who this passage may be about, see Gordon D. Newby, A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009). Newby takes it to refer to the angel Metatron identified with Ezra in Jewish Merkabah mysticism.
169 Nānautvī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 38-39.
misunderstanding of terms: if the intellect understands what two is and what four is, it cannot refute that two plus two equals four. However, if it misunderstands the terms, it will not understand that two plus two equals four. Similarly, if one understands the meaning of the terms khudā (God), 'azmat (greatness or magnificence), and qudrat (power), one would understand that the very definition of God includes the attributes of power and greatness, and whatever does not have these attributes would not be “God”. Following from this, even if the actions of human beings are from their choice (ikhtiyār) this does not entail that choice itself is the prerogative of human beings but rather, it is given by God. When life is given, so is choice, as is the power to exert that choice, and also the circumstances in which one acts are also created by God. So, asks Nānautvī, how is the human being a creator? In truth, he states, the Muʿtazili view is due to bad semantics; in the way that one who states that my wife is widowed or my son is orphaned is actually asserting the opposite, the Muʿtazilis are doing the same when they say that human beings create their own acts. Thus, in reality, they too believe in the unity of God.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, the origins of dualism (as found in the Persian religions), states Nānautvī, lie in protecting God from the charge that if evil originates from Him, He too must be evil. They, like Muʿtazilis are trying to protect God from evil being attributed to Him. Thus, they both try to attribute evil to others. This again demonstrates for Nānautvī that Zoroastrians, Magians, and their like also ultimately believe in one God. As for the existence of evil and the theodicy that the groups above are trying to explain, Nānautvī gives an alternative view from philosophical Sufism that turns to a key metaphysical distinction found in his works, the all-encompassing nature of God.¹⁷¹ He states here that God’s light encompasses all things but their evil cannot be attributed

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 39-42.
¹⁷¹ Later chapters of Taqrīr discuss in detail the meaning of encompassing (iḥāta) and its kinds and gradations, as well as why God is called the All-Encompassing (al-Muḥīṭ).
to Him. Instead even impure and evil things are enlightened through His light. Impure things cannot make Him impure and evil and impurity is only in the place where its \(^{172}\) \textit{wujūd} (existence) is instantiated. So human beings are the locus of manifestation (\textit{maḥall}) for those evil or impure things; it affects them, not their Creator. As support, Nānautvī gives examples from the creative arts: if the artisan makes an ugly pot, we do not call him ugly. Or a puppeteer is not blamed if one of his puppets dances well, another badly.\(^{173}\) Furthermore, Nānautvī states, good and evil are always from a perspective, suggesting that they are not absolute in themselves.

Finally in this particular discussion, Nānautvī turns to the Hindus and states that they, too, believe in the unity of God (\textit{tawḥīd}):

\begin{quote}
The Hindus, though they believe in many avatars [divine descents or manifestations], know only one Formless One (\textit{nirankār})...they say that they are all loci of manifestation (\textit{maẓḥar}) for that One. It is He who, in ever-changing forms, has appeared at different eras. As for idols or other objects of worship, they do not consider them creators, even though they do worship them.\(^{174}\)
\end{quote}

This description of Hinduism is among the most accurate in the annals of Muslim literature in India, and puts Nānautvī among those Muslim scholars in India who considered Hinduism to be monotheistic, a revealed religion, or both.\(^{175}\) Here, though, his purpose is just to demonstrate that even a religion known for its worship of countless gods and avatars, like all other religions, ultimately recognizes the principle of \textit{tawḥīd}. He further asserts that if one were to put all those

\(^{172}\) That is, evil’s.
\(^{173}\) Ibid., 42-44.
\(^{174}\) Ibid., 45-46.
who believed in *tawḥīd* from the beginning of the world on one side—which included great scholars and intellectuals from the Greek philosophers to the sages of the Jews, and most significantly, the scholars and sages of Islam—and those that denied *tawḥīd* on another, the result would be not even be a hundred to one. He goes as far as to say: “everyone attests to the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), whether he is aware of his attestation or not.” 176 Here is the foundation of his natural theology, as it is located in the idea of the *dīn al-fiṭra*, the original religion of all human beings, which in its final manifestation is to be found in the religion of Islam.

This section effectively ends the first part of Nānautvī’s treatise, in which he lays the foundations of his discussion of the existence and oneness of God and His relationships with human beings and the cosmos. Although this section is partially deconstructive while a large part of the rest of the treatise is more constructive, it serves as a good example of Nānautvī’s concerns and methodology in the elaboration of a rational theology for the public sphere in colonial India where he is attempting to construct a shared discourse in which Muslims and members of other religions as well as empiricists and modernists could participate. This is one reason that Nānautvī’s discourse is both cognitive of difference yet assertive of an underlying unity.

From these initial discussions, Nānautvī moves on to construct a multi-faceted natural and rational theology with the same methodology of utilizing the intellect and rational and empirical proofs and not arguments or proofs adduced from Islamic religious sources like the Qur’an or hadith to demonstrate the veracity of his points. He first aims to demonstrate that knowledge of the oneness of God cannot only be based on opinion or conjecture (*ẓannī*), as it was partially in his discussion above; rather it must be based on certainty (*yaqīnī*). For this, Nānautvī begins with proofs of God’s unicity (*waḥdāniyyat*) and the introduction of the central topic of later Islamic

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176 Nānautvī, *Taqrīr Dilpazīr* 47.
philosophy, existence or being (wujūd), illustrating the dimensions of which occupy him through much of the treatise.¹⁷⁷

Nānautī begins with a discussion of the unicity of God. If there were multiple creators, he states, the world would become non-existent (nīst, nabūd). We know for certain that God cannot have an imperfection; otherwise what would be the difference between him and us, who are defined by our imperfection? He who is imperfect, states Nānautī, cannot be self-existent, for otherwise he would have the capacity to bestow existence (wujūd) and would existentiate all good qualities for himself. Here, Nānautī is drawing from the idea of God as the Necessary Being whose existence and essence is one, a notion first elaborated by Ibn Sīnā but one that became a mainstay of later philosophy and theology.¹⁷⁸ God, in this perspective, is necessarily self-existent. He continues that if there was a multiplicity of gods bestowing existence, the capacity of existents to receive would become overloaded and they would become non-existent just as if a container is filled with double its capacity, it breaks.¹⁷⁹

After further discussion of the impossibility of multiple divine beings, Nānautī gives us a description of who God is:

We only know Him as God who is without blemish and without imperfection and the existence of the cosmos is through Him. All things are established on his support and depend upon Him. He is not dependent upon anyone. He is the root or reality (aṣl)¹⁸⁰ of all things and all things are His branches (far’).¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ As Nānautī’s discussion of wujūd is quite elaborate here, we will further examine the significance of wujūd for him in Ch.4 as discussed concisely in his public lecture at the Mayla-i Khudāshināsī.
¹⁷⁸ For a concise and clear description of Ibn Sīnā’s notion of the Necessary Being, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Three Muslim Sages, 24-28.
¹⁷⁹ Nānautī, Taqrīr Dilpazīr, 47-49.
¹⁸⁰ Aṣl is a metaphysically rich term that can mean reality, foundation, origin, essence, root, cause, and archetype.
¹⁸¹ Ibid., 50.
He continues by stating that wherever you look in the cosmos, you can see that everything is
dependent upon and proceeds from a root or foundation. Sunlight originates from the sun but
enlightens countless places in the world. Look at numbers and how many forms it can take as it
is added, subtracted, divided, and multiplied, yet its foundation and origin is the number one.
Similarly, there is one root for the many branches in a tree, there is one genus behind all the
different human beings, as it is with horses, donkeys, dogs, plants, and so on.\textsuperscript{182} Nānautvī’s
central point here is that “the whole cosmos has a shared participation (\textit{ishtirāk}) in being
(\textit{wujūd}).”\textsuperscript{183}

From here, Nānautvī further explores \textit{wujūd}, which, following Shāh Walī Allāh as well as the
school of Shiraz, is a central topic in his philosophy. He states that “existence or being (\textit{wujūd}) is
not the essence (\textit{ʿayn})…of existents (\textit{mawjūdāt}).”\textsuperscript{184} It is rather, a separate thing from them;
otherwise, it could not be that a thing is sometimes existent, sometimes not existent. Nānautvī
here is stating that since all things in the cosmos are in a constant state of change which brings
them from non-being to being to non-being and so on, existence could not be their essence,
otherwise the world and the things in it would always have been existent. He continues that
being (\textit{wujūd}) is everywhere the same, the being of the earth or sky is not different from the
being of you or me. But the expanse, duration, and intensity of being can differ. From this shared
participation in being, we can know, states Nānautvī, that the cosmos is distinct from its
existence: “The existence of the cosmos is an external (\textit{khārijī}) and accidental (\textit{ʿardī}) thing, not
foundational (\textit{ʿašlī}) nor essential (\textit{dhātī}).”\textsuperscript{185} Illustrating with an example, he states that the heat
of hot water is external, accidental, and borrowed, and is bestowed by fire, the heat of which is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] Ibid., 50-51.
\item[183] Ibid., 51.
\item[184] Ibid.
\item[185] Ibid., 52.
\end{footnotes}
foundational and essential. Similarly, light in a mirror is borrowed from the sun, the source of light. Likewise, “the existence of the cosmos, which is not foundational and essential…must have been received externally from one whose existence is essential and foundational. Who else could this be but the Maker?” This also proves, Nānautvī states, in reference to discussions he has in the treatise about the origin, end, and questions of the temporality or eternity of the world, that the world is not self-existent. This proof of God using the philosophical categories of essence and existence which can be combined with the qualities of essential and accidental, can be seen as Nānautvī’s central proof upon which he then builds further in the treatise.

Summarizing the next few sections of the treatise, Nānautvī continues with an explanation of the nature of multiplicity (kathrat) and how it is not a quality of wujūd but is actually due to nothingness (‘adam). It does not really exist and is mistakenly attributed to wujūd; just as the root of oneness is existence, the root of multiplicity is nothingness. Multiplicity is also not a quality of God, which also clarifies, states Nānautvī, that all the qualities present in wujūd are also necessarily to be found in God and that which are not are also necessarily not found in God. In addition, he states there is no division in wujūd, for then oneness (waḥdat), a quality of wujūd would not be rooted in it. Nānautvī next discusses a topic he comes back to many times in the course of the discussion, namely God’s Essence (dhāt), His Qualities, and their relationship. He continues by discussing: the meaning of essence; how God’s Essence is everlasting, pre-eternal (abadī) and post-eternal (azalī); how the heavens are not eternal; what is destiny, the eventual annihilation of the world, the causes of the health and decay of the cosmos; that the cosmos has a spirit (rūḥ); the connection of the existence of all things with the essence of God; the four elements; heaven and hell; Divine justice and punishment; the gradations of the intellect; the

\[\text{186 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{187 Ibid., 54-56.}\]
existence of angels and devils and why they cannot be seen; and the question of reincarnation. Nānautvī turns from metaphysics to cosmology and then with the last few questions, to theological anthropology, ethics, and spirituality. He moves to discussions of the causes of difficulty and ease in life, destiny, fear and hope; how the intellect rules over the will; spiritual medicine (ṭibb ṛuḥānī) and inner ailments; how good and bad actions are dependent upon virtue (akhlāq), justice, constancy and seriousness; why suicide is forbidden; the difference between suicide and martyrdom; and the connection between virtue and practice. He then returns to more theoretical concerns. He begins with a longer critique of the Muʿtazilis, then turns to the necessity of prophecy, the falsity of incarnational and avatar theories, refutations of the Trinity and divine sonship, and the reasons for differences in beliefs. He next turns to spiritual concerns, this time more directly related to Sufism. He discusses the causes of spiritual proximity to the Divine, spiritual purification, divine theophanies, unveiling, guidance, connections with the Divine, witnessing God, how the perfections of creation are firstly found in God, and a refutation of those who reject seeing God. Reintroducing metaphysical and theological concerns for the rest of the treatise, Nānautvī discusses in greater detail topics including God’s Qualities and Attributes, divine bestowal and human capacity, motion and change, time, form and substance, and action and its categories.

Concluding Remarks

As we saw, in Habermas’ account of the public sphere, rationality plays a central role. It is on a rational basis that public discourse is carried out. This emphasis on modern Western rationality has been critiqued by some of Habermas’ interlocutors because it assumes the normativity of modern Western rationality. Some of these critics have argued for the prevalence of non-rational
modes of discourse in the emergent public sphere in non-Western societies. While these criticisms may be valid in many instances, their insistence on non-rational modes of the public sphere can actually be counterproductive from a postcolonial perspective and reinforce the modern Western hegemonic view that rationality is the product of the modern West. In order to counter such a narrative, non-Western and non-modern modes of rationality must be investigated, and their role in the workings of South Asian intellectual and cultural life must be determined. Nānautvī’s interventions in the public sphere are specifically justified by him through recourse to an Islamic philosophical and rational tradition that does not owe its origins to modern Western philosophy and that has its own long history and contemporary life, but can engage modern Western thought as well as the theologies of other religious traditions on their own terms.

Furthermore, Nānautvī’s participation in public arenas of discourse in colonial India reveal the new possibilities opened up for the representatives of traditional Islam such as the ‘ulama’ in a modern milieu. Far from becoming irrelevant, the ‘ulama’ as well as Sufis were key participants in the reconfiguration of Islamic traditions that occurred as Muslims entered the modern age. Nānautvī’s works and participation in debates also reveals the beginnings of the fashioning of a new discourse about Islam in the public sphere, one which was not shaped by Muslim intellectual elites for other Muslim intellectual elites, but one in which the public—Muslim and non-Muslim—was addressed and came to increasingly participate. Moreover, Nānautvī’s philosophical theology was not only about Islam, but about the importance of religious and metaphysical questions, the significance of which was being challenged by the rise of modern science and philosophy. Through a work such as Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr, Nānautvī aimed to ideally

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188 See Reetz, *Islam in the Public Sphere*. 
start a conversation with participants from many intellectual and religious backgrounds on the fundamental questions of human existence. His rooting in *ḥikma* gave him a language of rationality to navigate the waters of a pluralistic milieu and to pose questions in such a way that they would not be immediately attributable to a particular religious language. It also gave him the possibility of positing an alternative rationality to that advocated through modern philosophy and science introduced through British colonial rule. This alternative rationality was not based on reducing the scope of human knowledge to the empirical and rational, but in light of the later Islamic philosophical tradition, of harmonizing intelligence, revelation, and spirituality and presenting them as all necessary for the fullest picture of the nature of existence and of human flourishing. Thus, Nānautvī was able to articulate a theology that simultaneously addressed the new modernizing pluralistic milieu of colonial India and presented Islam as the most rational and natural way of understanding the world and ourselves.
Chapter Three: Monotheistic Hindus, Idolatrous Muslims: Nānautvī, Dayananda and the Origins of Hindu-Muslim Theological Polemics in South Asia

Introduction

We have studied how Nānautvī fashioned a rational theology for the public sphere. One of the aims of this theology was to enable a strong presentation and defense of the Islamic tradition in the competitive religious milieu of nineteenth-century South Asia—a milieu that had been enabled by the rapid transformations brought through the colonial modernity of British rule. While Nānautvī’s participation in interreligious debates may at first sight seem to be a continuation of earlier forms of polemics and apologetics practiced by Muslims, the picture is far more complicated due to the particular conditions of modernity. While these polemics and debates were ostensibly held between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, the meaning of religion and religious identity had been reshaped in very significant ways through the modernizing developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christians, Muslims, and Hindus might have been inviting each other to convert to each other’s religions; however, this call was situated in and shaped by the context of a broader process of what Peter van der Veer has termed “conversion to modernity.” As such, it was a new discourse, enabled by developments such as the rise of spaces like the modern public sphere, the emergence of new ways of imagining religion in the image of modern Protestant Christianity, the construction of the modern notion of “religion” as a concrete object and its separation from the “secular”, and the internalization of modern European categories by colonized Hindus and Muslims, among other things.

In this chapter, I will examine how a particular instance of intellectual history, the theological debates between two giants of nineteenth-century religious revivalism in South Asia, Nānautvī and Swamī Dayananda Sarasvatī, can illustrate the transformation and reconfiguration of religious traditions in colonial South Asia. Although the idea of a perpetual Hindu-Muslim antagonism has become conventional today largely due to the narratives of British colonialism and South Asian nationalism, these debates were surprisingly the first of their kind in the sense of public and polemical encounters between representatives of a self-conscious “Hinduism” and “Islam” in Indian history. By tracing the genealogy of these debates, we can identify the processes of the making and remaking of religious identities and traditions that resulted in an increasingly conflictual and competitive relationship between Hindu and Islamic traditions and communities in the last one hundred and fifty years. The examination of the causes of this encounter between Nānautvī and Dayananda will highlight: the diverse ways that Indian and Islamic traditions interacted in the pre-colonial period; how British colonial policy enabled the development of new forms of religious identity and new epistemic spaces for reconfigured religious expressions; the role of Christian missionaries in the development of new and oppositional religious discourses; and how South Asian religious elites internalized these new religious identities, refashioned traditional modes of religious discourse, and introduced these discourses to the emergent publics of modern South Asia. The chapter will look in detail at the participation of Nānautvī in religious debates with Dayananda and study the contents of these debates, focusing on Nānautvī’s contributions, showing how they reveal the influence of new religious categories and oppositions in the South Asian religious imaginary190 and the

190 Here, I am patterning the term “religious imaginary” on Charles Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary, which he defines as: “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations,” Charles Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries (Durham, NC: Duke
presentation and remaking of Islamic intellectual traditions in the modern public arenas of discourse in conversation with others—whether these others represent other religious traditions or modernity. This last point brought out by these debates also demonstrates how religious discourses, more so than ever in the modern period, emerge in conversation and conflict with the discourses of others.

What is the Nature of the Relationship between “Hinduism” and “Islam”?

The questions we pose can betray our unexamined assumptions and sometimes even the unquestioned frameworks that inform and determine the very manner in which we envisage the subject(s) of our inquiry. After all, the terms of our inquiry did not emerge in a vacuum but have a very particular, often complicated, history to them, a history obscured when constructed “objects”191 are treated as “given”. To treat a term or object as “given” means to posit it as an objective reality outside of history and context. Doing so enables us to escape the often complex historical contestation and political maneuvering that has gone into establishing a definition of a term as normative, enabling us to speak of it in an uncomplicated way.

I offer these reflections because they directly bear upon the subject of the inquiry that concerns us in introducing this chapter, a question that has often been posed: what has been/is the nature of the relationship between Hinduism and Islam? On the surface, this seems to be an uncomplicated question, a question that many have tried to answer with varying conclusions in

University Press, 2004). Hindu-Muslim relations in colonial South Asia are an illustrative example of the transformation of social and religious imaginaries by colonial modernity and its effects.

191 The manner in which I use “object” here is based on Bernard Cohn’s understanding of the way colonial Britons engaged in an “objectification” of South Asian knowledge traditions, which will be discussed further below. See Bernard S. Cohn, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xiv-xv.
the last two centuries, from British colonial administrators to Hindu and Muslim nationalists, and from secularist Indians to Western Orientalists and academics. But is this question an unproblematic one? Is it even a legitimate question?

The contention, which will be elaborated, is that this question is indeed problematic. Beyond that, the very terms in which it is posed conceal centuries of multifarious historical interactions and programs of power and control. In other words, the manner in which these terms “Hinduism” and “Islam” are posited, firstly enables the obscuring of a rich history of complex exchanges and “contact zones”¹⁹² between different religious, intellectual, and cultural traditions that came to be reified and objectified into the meta-categories of Hinduism and Islam. Secondly, it obscures the role of British colonialism and the environment that it established—which came about due to both a deliberate policy to control and as a historical accident—in bringing about the objectification of these relatively fluid religious traditions into bounded “corporate”¹⁹³ entities. Therefore, what I want to attempt to do is not to offer an answer to the question about the relationship of Hinduism and Islam, but rather to trace a history of this question itself, and by doing so, attempt alternate understandings of the objects—Hinduism and Islam—and specifically their relationship designated in the question, and see how and why these came to be understood in the manner that they are popularly understood today.

So how has the relationship of Islam and Hinduism been represented in the public sphere in the recent past and in the contemporary period? An example, perhaps now academically outdated but

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¹⁹³ See Carl Ernst’s discussion of the emergence of a “corporate” Islam in the modern era in his *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 38-47. Ernst’s use of the term is apt if the Latin roots of the term are taken into consideration: “to make into a body.” This is a useful way of envisaging how disparate, even if related, traditions were categorized as part of a meta-unit in the modern construction of religion.
still very reflective of popular discourse in South Asia and the Western media, is proffered by a man who was once called the doyen of the study of South Asian Islam in the West, Aziz Ahmed (1914-1978). Though he is best known for works on South Asian Islam that he composed after moving to England and then later to Canada, he was educated in England during the years of the Raj and his perspective was very much a product of the colonial era, as is evidenced in the typology he uses in his works for describing the relationship of Islam and Hinduism. His work, very influential on South Asian Muslim studies in the West, is most interesting for being an illustration in academic language—rather than the more simplistic language of the media or the sloganeering of political movements—of a particular perspective shared by colonial British historians and orientalists, South Asian Hindu and Muslim nationalists, the popular media, and until recently, much of academia. This perspective situates Islam and Hinduism in a relationship of perpetual antagonism throughout history in which religious conflict is seen as proceeding from a natural opposition of these religions to one another. It is also very significant for illustrating how European ideas about South Asia introduced during colonization were given a new lease on life through being adopted—sometimes creatively—by South Asians themselves.

In one of his most influential works, *Studies in the Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*, Aziz Ahmad gives a historical exposition of Hindu-Muslim relations when imagined through the lens of perpetual hostility, citing many an orientalist and missionary from British India. In the introductory section entitled “Conflicting Nature of the two Cultures” of a chapter entitled “Introductory: The Muslim Impact”, Ahmad begins his discussion with a quote from the American orientalist and Methodist missionary to British India, Murray Titus (1885-1964):

> For twelve long centuries…Islam has been in contact with Hinduism in India. For twelve centuries each community has been confronted with the other…Their
Ahmad’s immediate gloss on this: “This is on the whole an understatement.” Then he adds that the whole “history of medieval and modern India is to a very considerable extent a history of Hindu-Muslim religio-cultural tensions” which has been punctuated on occasion by individual efforts at mutual understanding and harmony but in which the divisive forces have been much more dynamic than the cohesive ones. Ahmad continues with a quote from another British orientalist, F.W. Thomas (1867-1956), that Islam is the “very antithesis of Hinduism”, a claim that he then painstakingly details with reference to all manners of oppositions between Hinduism and Islam. The binaries he suggests, quoting many sources, both European and South Asian, include: the myriad philosophical and mystical expressions of Hinduism vs. the austere rigor and adhesion to God’s Word in Islam; a psychology geared toward the “concrete and iconographic” vs. one that is “atomistic, abstract, geometrical, and iconoclastic”; the ability to assimilate new ideas, new gods, and other faiths vs. the inability to adapt or compromise; openness to the other vs. “religio-cultural insularity”; “a spiritually and materially hierarchical view of religion” vs. “religio-social egalitarianism”; traditional vs. revelatory religion; natively Indian vs. foreign; belonging to India vs. belonging to the umma; concerned with what is true vs. concerned with what is right; emphasizing religion as private vs. emphasizing “incorporation in the collective body of the faithful” and so on. An aspect of Ahmad’s analysis that is revealing of his methodology and pertinent for our argument is his direct reference to Oswald Spengler (1880-1936) and Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), European historians who classified civilizations as units

195 Ahmed, 73-76.
(or organisms in the case of Spengler) that were indicative of a particular genius that was then manifested in all their specific cultural characteristics including religion. An implication of this perspective is that civilizations and religions are seen as self-enclosed units which are mutually exclusive and do not admit of admixture or change. Any change comes to be seen as corruption of the ahistorical essence of the entity in question. Richard Eaton, a pioneer in what can be called the revisionist school of South Asian history, comments on this view of religion and culture:

Further inclining scholars to locate “Islam” in classical texts or chronicles was a tendency, found in much scholarly writing in Europe and America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to collapse religion with culture, and to conflate both of these with civilization and even territory. In this way, human populations became understood as naturally divided into self-contained and mutually exclusive civilizational/territorial units. Reduced to checklists of enduring, ahistorical “core” values, these civilizations were in turn construed as immutable structures...lying beyond the corrosive effects of historical process or change...What is more, many theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assumed that each civilization’s essential qualities were stamped on it at the moment of birth and persisted through all time. Such a reductive and ahistorical approach attributed special significance to a civilization’s place of origin, for only there could it be construed as truly indigenous and hence genuinely authentic.196

Eaton’s analysis helps us to highlight some particular assumptions of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European understanding of religions—which are reproduced, via the influence of British colonial education, in the perspectives voiced by Aziz Ahmad above. In this understanding, Hinduism and Islam were civilizations and religions which had specific essential characteristics best found in their origins and which were bounded and mutually exclusive. As such, any point of contact between the two would at best be arbitrary and would always challenge each other’s core values and authenticity. Furthermore, since authenticity was

196 Richard M. Eaton, India’s Islamic Traditions 711-1750 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11.
identified with origin, any change in a religion, especially through contact with another religion, could only be seen as a corruption and deviation from orthodoxy. The influence of this schema in South Asia itself cannot be overemphasized. A couple of examples illustrate this. The two-nation theory that resulted in the creation of a “homeland” for South Asian Muslims, Pakistan, was a direct consequence of viewing Hinduism and Islam as completely autonomous and mutually opposed religious and cultural units. Similarly, the rise of the Hindutva movement, which champions India as a Hindu country based on an orientalist reimagining of a golden-age Hinduism which was destroyed by the arrival of marauding Muslims—who are seen as interloping foreigners even if they be of Indian origin because territory is identified here with religion—is a case example of the influence of some of the ideas seen above.

Simply stated and contrary to popular opinion, the very idea that there exist two autonomous religious units—identified with the civilizations they spawned—and furthermore that these are in mutual opposition due to their essential natures with the resultant historical conflict, is a construct of nineteenth-century British colonialism. To speak of Hinduism and Islam and a Hindu-Muslim conflict in the context of South Asia prior to the nineteenth century is to speak anachronistically. No doubt there were practitioners of various Indian religious traditions who later came to be amalgamated into the category of Hindu and Muslims of various persuasions and perspectives, but there was no Hinduism and no Islam in the way we use these terms today. “Hinduism” and “Islam” in South Asia are, discursively, largely products of the nineteenth century. To look for the beginnings of Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia, one need not go

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197 A widespread example of this among Orientalist scholars of the religions of the world was to divide the religions into Aryan and Semitic, thus reducing the rich temporal and cultural diversity in religious traditions to supposed racial and cultural origins. Tomoko Masuzawa, in her widely cited study of the origins of the category of world religions describes how Islam was classified as a Semitic and Arab religion based on its origins, which were supposed to be part of its immutable essence. See Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 179-196.
back to the beginnings of Muslim presence in South Asia as is the wont of both Hindutva ideologues and Muslim nationalists, and for a long time, even Western academics, but merely to colonial British India.

The Pre-History of Muslims, Hindus, and Religious Identity in South Asia

Before further elaboration of the colonial construction of Hindu-Muslim conflict, let us step back and ask a related question: if a dichotomous understanding of Hinduism and Islam is a colonial construct, how did Hindus and Muslims represent themselves and each other in the pre-modern era? The terms Hindu and Muslim as markers of religious difference or identity hardly appear in pre-colonial literature about the other, whether belonging to Indian or Islamic traditions. Similarly, Islam and Hinduism as systems of religious doctrine and practice are conspicuously absent as descriptive of the other. It has been well-documented that the term Hindu does not have an indigenous Indian origin, but came to be used to denote the cultural groups inhabiting the Subcontinent by Muslims and others, by whom it was used primarily as a geographical and not religious marker. It was not used self-referentially by the religio-cultural groups designated by it until the colonial era, when both Hindu and Hinduism as religious terms and markers came to be increasingly used first by the British and then by Hindus themselves as well as other South Asian religious communities. In the same manner, although the terms *muslim* and *islām* have a

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199 There is an increasing body of literature about the origins and construction of Hinduism. For a representation of the various perspectives on the issue, see the collection of essays: Esther Bloth, Marianne Keppens, and Rajaram Hegde, eds., *Rethinking Religion in India: The Colonial Construction of Hinduism* (New York: Routledge, 2010). While there is an increasing consensus that Hinduism was largely a colonial construct, there are a smaller body of scholars who argue that there were signs of Hindu self-awareness and identity formation in late pre-colonial India citing, for example, the poetry of Kabīr or Guru Nanak which criticized both Hindus and Muslims by name. An example of such a perspective is to be found in David Lorenzen, *Who Invented Hinduism: Essays on Religion in*
Qur’anic origin and were long used by Muslims, they were transformed into modern religious identity markers only in the colonial period. Specifically, the manner in which islām became Islam as it was mapped onto a modern metanarrative of religion, changed the term from its primary etymological meaning of submission to God as an individual’s action to a meaning in which Islam denoted primarily a collective identity and was a species of the genus religion differentiated from other species like Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and so on. The still useful classic work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, was perhaps the earliest to argue how the modern concept of religion as objectified and reified rich and diverse, lived and experienced “cumulative traditions”, to use his preferred alternative term to religions, into abstractions fixed in “a system of ideas, beliefs.” In a characteristic passage on the problems with the term “Hinduism”, to which he adds “Christianity” and “Islam”, he states:

My objection to the term ‘Hinduism’ of course, is not on the grounds that nothing exists. Obviously an enormous quantity of phenomena is to be found that this term covers. My point, and I think that this is the first step that one must take towards understanding something of the vision of Hindus, is that the mass of religious phenomena that we shelter under the umbrella of that term, is not a unit, and does not aspire to be. It is not an entity in any theoretical sense, let alone any practical one. ‘Islam’ and ‘Christianity’, as we shall subsequently consider, are also in fact, in actual practice, internally diverse and have been historically fluid.

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200 There is still no full study of this transformation of islām as an individual act to the reified use of Islam as a particular religion associated with a particular historical religious community and even more so, the application of the modern category of religion to Islam. The term islām is interpreted by almost all early Qur’anic commentators not in a communal but individual sense and it is only with later commentators like Ibn Kathīr, that a change occurs. For a discussion of this and the use of the term islām in classical Qur’anic commentaries, see Jane I. Smith, “An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term "islām" as Seen in a Sequence of Qur’ān Commentaries” (Cambridge: Harvard Dissertations in Religion, 1975). Wilfred Cantwell Smith gives a short overview of this change of meaning in the term from the early to the modern period in *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 75-108 that can be used as a background to a full study. Ernst also offers a useful overview of the reification of Islam in his *Following Muhammad*, 37-69.

201 W. C. Smith, 40.

202 Ibid., 63.
Furthermore, pre-modern Hindu texts do not use the term Muslim to describe the peoples later designated as Muslim but rather use ethnic terms like turushka (Turk) or all-purpose labels for foreigners such as yavanna (Ionian, meaning Greek) or terms to denote outsiders from a Brahmanical perspective, whether Indian or non-Indian, such as mleccha, which signifies someone ‘outside the pale’. Muslims were not recognized as a religious category by non-Muslim Indians until they were officially identified as such by the colonial British through such significant administrative measures as the census, which itself was based on a canon of orientalist classificatory schema. This categorization was then internalized and the colonial British identification of Muslim as a religious category opposed to the similar religious category of Hindu came to be adopted by newly self-identified Hindus.

Religious belonging in pre-modern South Asia was quite unlike the strict classification schemes employed by the colonial British and adopted by South Asians themselves in the modern period; rather, it must be locally and temporally contextualized. Dominique Sila-Khan has discussed that “in medieval India people were classified mainly according to the categories referred to as jāt or jāti and panth”, which refer respectively to social or professional caste and spiritual path. Jāti, which is based on an organic and observable social reality and which is a dynamic category, should be distinguished from varna, the hierarchical and static, often reified notion of caste popularized by Orientalists in which all Hindus are presented as belonging to one of four

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203 See Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims (Eighth to Fourteenth Century)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998). For a study of the later pre-colonial period regarding Hindu views of Muslims, see Cynthia Talbot, “Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-Colonial India”, in Eaton, 83-117.

204 Sila-Khan, 12.
castes. Significantly, Muslims in South Asia were socially stratified just as other groups with a central division between *ashrāf*, the Muslim elites who claimed descent from outside India, and *ajlāf*, converted Indians and many *jātis*, for example those belonging to the artisan classes, among the *ajlāf*. The other term Sila-Khan references above, *panth* (as well as similar terms like *mārg* and *sampradāy*), particular traditions founded by spiritual masters, was also used by many South Asians over the last several centuries to identify themselves with the *panths* of Kābīr and Guru Nanak, which later crystallized into the “religion” of Sikhism under British colonial rule.

In these two celebrated cases, the creation of a new *panth* served to distinguish the inner spiritual message from the outward institutional and authority structures represented by the Brāhmans and the ‘ulama’. In addition, there was a tremendous variety of religious practice and even doctrine among Muslims when one looks beyond the official Islam of the ‘ulama’ associated with Muslim political rule. In addition to Sunnis, there were many Shi‘i groups, the Isma‘ilis in particular, who very creatively engaged the Indian environment, not to mention the richness and diversity of Sufism in South Asia. The widespread influence of Sufism facilitated processes by which Muslims in South Asia were seen and saw themselves as part of a *panth*, a distinctive spiritual tradition, instead of a theologically rigid religion opposed to other religions and paths.

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205 See the classic study by Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970). This perspective has been strongly challenged by scholars working from a postcolonial perspective, who argue that the Orientalist notion of caste was an ahistorical application of Hindu scriptural ideals to the far more complex and messier reality on the ground in colonial India. See, for example, Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

206 For the transformation of Sikhism into a religion in the colonial period, see Arvind Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

207 For a wide-ranging historical study of Sufism and its diverse expressions in India, which references many instances of the interaction of Sufis with the Indian religions, see Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, vols. I-II (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1978).
The important point that emerges from these observations is that religion emerged from particular, often local, lived traditions and not from identification with an abstract and conceptualized “Islam” or “Hinduism”. Instead of an atemporal Islam and an atemporal Hinduism, there existed the particularities of local and temporal contexts, where religious traditions and their interactions were constantly negotiated. Hypothetically, if one were to ask a pre-modern South Asian what his religion was, if it were possible to find the right words to frame such a question, he or she would likely reply by naming the various practices, traditions, and beliefs obtained from his family, his village, his jāti, his panth, or a certain charismatic guru or pīr. It must be added that for Muslims there was no doubt a connection to a larger collectivity as well as holy places and personages not situated in India, but the way such affinities were made concrete was precisely by channeling them through the local. Examples would be a saint buried in the nearby village who represents the sanctity of the Prophet (even though he may be claimed by other religious communities as well)\textsuperscript{208}, or a family lineage that claims its origins in a companion of the Prophet whose descendants had moved to India; or even more daring theological moves such as the Satpanth Ismaʿīlī hymns that paint ʿAlī, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet and first Shiʿi Imam, as an avatar of Vishnu.\textsuperscript{209} Through such associations, Muslims negotiated what Eaton calls the “double movement between the local cultures of South

\textsuperscript{208} Richard Eaton, citing Ernest Gellner’s classic study of the saints of the Atlas in which he describes how these saints do not represent Islam but “are” Islam to non-literate Berbers who are not able to access the Arabic textual tradition of Islam, describes how this can also be applied to Indian Muslims, for whom saints and their shrines played a similar role of providing religious authority and sacred presence. See Richard M. Eaton, “The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid,” in Moral Conduct and Authority: the Place of Adab in South Asian Islam, ed. Barbara D. Mercal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 333-56.

\textsuperscript{209} See Tazim Kassam, Songs of Wisdom and Circles of Dance: Hymns of the Satpanth Ismāʿīlī Muslim Saint, Pīr Shams (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) for a study and translations of these hymns, referred to as gināns.
Asia and the universal norms of Islam,\textsuperscript{210} that is characteristic of the South Asian Muslim experience as a whole.

Dominique Sila-Khan’s groundbreaking work on the negotiation of religious identities in South Asia, \textit{Crossing the Threshold: Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia}, is a fine counterpoint to conventional studies of the interactions between Muslims and Hindus in South Asia. Yohanan Friedmann, in an oft-cited article, offers such a schema of Hindu-Muslim relations in which Indian Muslims are viewed as a “foreign” community out of place in idolatrous, polytheistic India whose principal options were strict orthodoxy or possibly heterodox conciliation with the alien environment:

There was, on the one hand, the feeling that the Indian Muslims were constantly in danger of being overwhelmed by an environment that could only be described as an anathema to their cherished ideal of monotheism. The apprehension created an intense desire to preserve Islam in its pristine purity and to protect it assiduously from any encroachment of Indian customs and beliefs. The development of strict orthodoxy was, however, only one result of the fact that the Indian Muslims lived in the midst of a non-Muslim, and, in their eyes, idolatrous and polytheistic population. Diametrically opposed to it was the attempt to find a common denominator for the two civilizations, to establish a mutually acceptable \textit{modus vivendi} for their respective adherents, and to argue that all religions are essentially the same though their external and accidental features are diverse. The conciliatory trend was always weaker than the orthodox one. The few rulers who adopted it to inspire their successors, and the religious thinkers who developed it had few disciples who continued to walk on the path of inter-religious harmony and compromise.\textsuperscript{211}

\textsuperscript{210} Eaton, \textit{India’s Islamic Traditions}, 6.
\textsuperscript{211} Yohanan Friedmann, “Islamic Thought in Relation to the Indian Context,” in Eaton, \textit{India’s Islamic Traditions}, 50-51. There have been surprisingly few broad overviews of the Hindu-Muslim encounter in South Asia. Carl Ernst has written a more recent overview of the Hindu-Muslim encounter which does not make the mistake of dividing all Indian Muslims into two diametrically opposed camps but which still largely limits itself to the perspectives of Muslim elites. See Carl W. Ernst, "The Limits of Universalism in Islamic Thought: the Case of Indian Religions," \textit{Muslim World} 101:1 (2011): 1-19.
The problem with this analysis will become clearer with Sila-Khan’s alternative perspective, which begins with questioning the very terms which divide Muslims and Hindus into monolithic and unchanging blocs:

Instead of trying to decide whether Hindus or Muslims have been friends or enemies, or if they have been so alternately, one should rather ask the following questions: which Hindus have coexisted and interacted with which Muslims; which Muslims have been hostile to which Hindus; and which Hindus have regarded which Muslims as their enemies? If we assume that religious groups are not defined once and for all, the idea of two compact and uniform blocs can only be a construct.212

This perspective takes into account that there have been many varieties of Muslims who have many different kinds of relationships with different varieties of Hindus. The upshot of this is that it is not accurate to make blanket statements but rather to treat every Muslim-Hindu encounter specifically. One of the key differences in Sila-Khan’s work with that of earlier scholars like Friedmann is that his whole analysis is based on a small selection of works by political and religious elites in South Asia who are mostly Sunni, ashrāf, and proud of their foreign lineages, instead of taking into account the vast diversity of Muslims in South Asia.

Sila-Khan begins the work cited above with a chapter entitled “Who is Hindu, Who is Muslim?” Her second chapter is an apt answer to that question in the form of a quotation from Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh tradition: “There is no Hindu, There is no Musulman”, which she follows up by another quote, this time by the celebrated Punjabi Sufi poet Bulleh Shāh: “I am neither Hindu nor Muslim.”213 What do these eminent personages mean by such utterances? Sila-Khan tries to provide an answer that demonstrates the complexity of religious identity in pre-modern

212 Sila-Khan, 4.
213 Sila-Khan, 8, 30.
South Asia. Instead of the way we have come to imagine religious identity in South Asia as bounded, unchanging, and singular, Sila-Khan, complicating this simplistic perspective, provides four modes of contact—which can be further simplified into two broad categories—between traditions emanating from Indian or Hindu sources and those emanating from Islamic sources. The first broad category includes modes she calls “‘alliances’, ‘sharing’, and ‘borrowing’” and the second category “referring to a process which may be termed ‘overlapping’, that is connected with ‘liminal’ traditions and communities.”\(^{214}\) Alliances, which often involve protecting or healing the other, “can be regarded as sacred covenant struck between two different communities”\(^ {215}\) in which “both retain their respective identities”\(^ {216}\) with the caveat that identity in pre-modern South Asia was based on particular caste or sectarian traditions. Examples of this phenomenon described by Sila-Khan include the notion of Muslim saints protecting Hindu or Jain sacred sites with their graves found at the entrance or grounds of such sites; the possession by saints or deities of the other tradition through which one acquires miraculous healing powers; and visitation of the shrines of the other in order to obtain healing. In such cases, says Sila-Khan, “alliances struck for protection are generally connected with the belief in one single ‘power’ whose ‘religious identity’, as we have it now, is of no concern to the devotees.”\(^ {217}\) This is ultimately the recognition of a unitary Divine reality which goes beyond formal differences. The saint or goddess of another tradition becomes a way of connecting to a reality which transcends the divergences of different religious traditions. Such an alliance can also be seen in another mode, that which Sila-Khan calls “sharing.” This entails the sharing of sacred time and space by participating in festivals and holy days and visiting and asking for blessing at the shrines and

\(^{214}\) Sila-Khan, 32.
\(^{215}\) Ibid.
\(^{216}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{217}\) Ibid.
sacred sites of the other without any merging of identities. It should be noted that we are not here talking only about Hindus visiting the tombs of Sufi saints, as is still widely practiced, but also of Muslims participating in Hindu temple festivities, visiting Hindu shrines, and, in the mode of “alliance”, even being possessed temporarily by Hindu deities.

A third mode Sila-Khan describes is “borrowing”, which “as a specific mode of discourse, is a conscious process through which elements from a different tradition are integrated into one’s own worldview to stress the profound unity of the Divine despite the plurality of vision. In these cases the result is obviously not innovation or creation of a new religious movement.” Examples she gives include the integration of Nath yogi doctrines and practices into his teachings by the major Sufi saint Shaykh ʿAbd al-Quddūs Gangohī and of bhakti poetry by Bulleh Shāh (d. 1758), in both cases mediated by Ibn al-ʿArabī’s doctrine of the oneness of being (waḥdat al-wujūd), which enabled them to theorize formal difference while maintaining supraformal unity. To these three modes of relation, Sila-Khan opposes the fourth, liminality, “where identities become blurred”218 (and not only temporarily). Most often, in colonial and later academic scholarship, such identities that combine seemingly heterogeneous elements without resolution were seen as syncretistic and the common unlearned people’s attempt to mix religions. Sila-Khan counters:

…contrary to what the British census officers thought, liminality does not emerge spontaneously as a ‘popular’ phenomenon arising from the ‘ignorance of the masses’, nor does it reflect a pious and somewhat naïve attempt at ‘reconciling two religions.’ It is the result of complex factors that can be analysed with accuracy.219

218 Ibid., 44.
219 Ibid.
Sila-Khan analyzes these complex factors particularly in regard to the Niẓārī Ismaʿīlis. Through the use of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, “the Ismaili preachers and their followers never disclosed to the non-initiated the real nature and origin of their faith which looked outwardly, according to the context, either as one of the numerous medieval *panths* prevalent in the northern part of the Subcontinent or as a Sufi *ṭarīqa*.” Furthermore, they saw their doctrine as the culmination of all religious traditions, and as such, they were able to integrate diverse elements of the Indian traditions. In time, some Ismaʿīli groups forgot their origins and their dissimulatory stance and became absorbed into mainstream traditions, both Hindu and Muslim.

The Sant movement associated with Kabīr, Nanak, and Dadū Mīr is another example of a liminal tradition as the identification of these figures and their followers with any one religious tradition is problematic, though in the case of Nanak, his primary following crystallized into the Sikh religion primarily in the colonial period. This is because the tradition consciously chose to operate outside of the established religious traditions. Sila-Khan states, “The Sants seem to have consciously associated a number of Sufī concepts and terminologies with concepts drawn from the Nath heritage or from the indigenous idiom of *bhakti*, without identifying themselves with any of these traditions.” Saintly figures from these traditions, as with the Ismaʿīli preachers, could appear as sadhus or as *fuqarā* to their followers, and their identity is contested to this day, sometimes with dual shrines built next to each other, as in the case of Kabīr, claimed both by Hindus and Muslims today. However, even in the recent past before the modern fixing of religious identities, his followers sometimes called themselves Kabīrpanthīs, followers of the path of Kabīr. What we can gather from Sila-Khan’s analysis is the multivalent nature of

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220 Ibid., 45.
221 Ibid., 49.
222 Indeed, the main organizer of the Festival of the Knowledge of God (*Mayla-i Khudāshināsī*) examined in Chapter 4 attended by Nānautvī and Dayananda was precisely a Kabīrpanthī.
religious identity—to the extent it can be called “identity”—in pre-modern South Asia and how the categories we are accustomed to simply did not exist, or even if they did, they did not denote fixed entities the way they do today.

The Construction of a Hindu-Muslim Conflict in Colonial South Asia

Let us now return to the colonial period and ask: why and by what means did the colonial British construct a Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia? One answer is given by Edward Said, who has pointed to the significance of narrative in the justification of the colonial enterprise:

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work in it; who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.223

Like other colonial powers, the British, when they had to justify their rule over the Subcontinent, constructed a narrative that took elements that we have seen above—atemporal and exoticized versions of Hinduism and Islam in perpetual conflict—and expounded it as positivist history. Colonial British historians were, by and large, apologists for British imperialism and chief among their works is the nine-volume work of Elliot and Dowson, History of India as Told by Its Own Historians, published in 1849. The historiographical method of this publication was to focus on the Turko-Persian chronicles written by court historians of various Muslim kings. These were read in a strictly positivist manner and were presented as the authentic history of pre-modern India, completely ignoring their hagiographic intent and semi-mythological dimensions, not to mention the countless internal contradictions between different

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chronicles.\textsuperscript{224} The volumes make selections from these chronicles that highlight the evils of Muslim political rule. This is accomplished through constructing a narrative that identifies the characters represented in these chronicles as representative of Islam and Muslims, and their invasion of and rule over India as a total suppression and barbaric intrusion by ruthless foreigners that destroyed Hindu culture. Emerging from this narrative is a tripartite historical schema: a rich, golden Hindu past,\textsuperscript{225} which was disrupted by its destruction at the hands of fanatical Muslims who overtook India, until the British came to deliver them, defeat the invaders, and establish civilization and order.\textsuperscript{226} It is, of course, not acknowledged that the majority of Indian Muslims did not come from foreign lands, and even those that did, including the so-called invaders after Maḥmūd such as the Delhi sultans and Mughal kings, did not rule as a “foreign” power with a power base outside India but settled in India and made it their home. Using this schematization, Elliot and Dawson are able to claim the benevolence of the British Empire, and state that their publication, essentially an exposé of the brutal Muslim past of India, would “make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them

\textsuperscript{224} The varying contents of these chronicles are well-summarized in Romila Thapar’s Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History (New York: Verso, 2005), 36-72, an important work that deconstructs the event of the destruction of the temple at Somnath by Maḥmūd of Ghaznī by looking at multiple sources, including Sanskrit inscriptions and Jain court histories, instead of the Turko-Persian chronicles alone used by British colonial authors and Hindu and Muslim nationalists. It is remarkable that these indigenous sources make much less, if anything, of the destruction of the Somnath temple unlike the triumphalist zeal of the Turko-Persian chronicles. The claims of vast destruction and looting made in the chronicles are much harder to find in Indian sources and there is little evidence of any kind of trauma, so often claimed by Hindu fundamentalists picking up colonial interpretations, as the temple was quickly rebuilt. In addition, temple destruction was something that was not uncommon among Indian rulers themselves whenever one state conquered another, revealing that temple desecration and plunder was a political and economic, and not primarily religious, act and was already established in India as a means of humiliating the vanquished or of acquiring wealth. See Richard M. Eaton’s insightful article on the subject: “Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States” in Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000), 246-281 (later expanded into the monograph Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India (Gurgaon, India: Hope India, 2004).

\textsuperscript{225} This image was indebted to a Romanticist Orientalism that saw ancient Hindu India as the cradle of spirituality. See Ronald Inden, Imagining India (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{226} This schema originates in the first major British colonial account of the history of India: James Mill’s History of British India published in 1818. For further discussion of this tripartite schema, see Ernst, Eternal Garden, 23ff.
under the mildness and equity of their rule.” In addition to being apologia for British rule, this selective reading also reduced history to politics and viewed Muslims and Hindus as religio-political groups, a move which came to be adopted by South Asians themselves with enormous consequences. A narrative constructed to justify empire was internalized by many Hindus, for whom the Muslim period of Indian history became the imagined memory of a trauma that must be redressed if not avenged. It was similarly internalized by many Muslims, who re-imagined it as the glorious triumph of Muslim power and civilization, when, in sharp contrast to the present, Muslims were in control and ascendancy.

We have seen the roots of some of the categorizations adopted by the colonial British from modern European historians such as the positing of multiple autonomous civilizations, each wedded to its central religious ideas. When mapped onto India, this generated the categories of the dominant religions—and accompanying civilizations—of Hinduism and Islam, opposed to each other in almost all their general and particular characteristics. British colonial histories of South Asia then translated this schema onto historical data from South Asia read through a positivist lens without regard to context or intent, generating a historiography of perpetual mutual antagonism between the two religions and civilizations. These two factors account for an important dimension in the construction of modern religious identities and interreligious conflict in South Asia. But are these enough to explain the full context in which the debates between Nānautvī and Dayananda occurred?

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227 Elliott and Dowson, *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians* (Allahabad, India: Kitab Mahal, 1963), 1:xxii.
228 The exception, of course, was the modern secular West, which, in the progressive version of this theory, advanced beyond the stage of religion with the emergence of modern Western science and rationalism, a feat the others had not yet accomplished. There were theorists like the aforementioned Spengler with a more pessimistic and conservative view, which saw the move away from religion as an indicator of the decline and impending destruction of that civilization, but such views were scarce.
Religion as a New Discursive Formation in Colonial South Asia

To contextualize the religious polemics of late colonial India such as that between Nānautvī and Dayananda, it is informative to trace their genealogy to the major transformations—religious, epistemic, political, and social—that were occurring in South Asia under British colonial rule. A particularly useful tool for such analysis is anthropologist Bernard Cohn’s notion (itself reliant on the work of Michel Foucault) of new “discursive formations” in colonial India and how they established new epistemological spaces, fashioned new discourses, and re-invented categories, in the process “converting Indian forms of knowledge into European objects.” Cohn has examined how new discursive formations came into being in colonial India in the domains of language, law, governance, and art due to British modes of appraising Indian forms of knowledge with a view towards control. By defining and classifying a thing, one can control it.

As Cohn puts it: “the conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge.” Cohn divides this investigation of South Asian knowledge into various kinds of modalities: the historiographic, the observational/travel, the survey, the enumerative, the museological, and the surveillance. Although his work focuses primarily on the way that language, law, and governance were transformed under British rule through new classifications and codifications, similar processes of objectification and the creation of a new discursive formation can be seen in the delineation and evaluation from the colonial period of what came to be termed “religion”. Instead of multivalent, constantly negotiated, lived traditions that interacted with diverse elements of culture with which they overlapped, religious traditions became an object which could be investigated, classified,

229 Cohn, 21.
230 Ibid., 16.
231 Ibid., 4-11.
defined, and thereby controlled. Using this approach, the construction of Hinduism and Islam discussed above can be seen as applications of a metanarrative of “religion” under which they are subsumed. The modalities mentioned above are not exhaustive and almost all of them were used in order to understand and delineate an arena of life that was deemed essential to the South Asian “mentality” and culture (as opposed to the modern secular West): their religious beliefs and practices. This was, in a sense, a logical consequence of the modern European separation of the religious and the secular. By claiming the secular, European modernity also distanced itself from the religious, which became its “other” and came to be increasingly identified with the colonized and native populations of the non-Western world. The device of classifying South Asians into clear-cut categories and accompanying taxonomies denoting different religions thus served the purpose of claiming to know, and thereby control, the messy and variegated religious life of India, and to establish a process of othering in which the chief identity of Indians became their schematized religious affiliation, as opposed to the secular and rational identity claimed by the colonial West.

Out of Cohn’s investigative modalities stated above, we have already seen the employment of the historiographic modality in the construction of South Asian religions in which “History in its broadest sense was a zone of debate over the ends and means of their [i.e. the British] rulership in India.” The other modalities can be seen as similarly supplying the information and tools for the construction of religion, among other things, in South Asia. The observational/travel modality enabled the British through observation and travel accounts to categorize “particular

232 A dimension of this bifurcation between the colonizer and the colonized was the distinction between the rational, enlightened West liberated by science and progress, and the superstitious, unenlightened East mired in religion and backward beliefs and customs. Nānautvī’s emphasis on rationality that we explored in Ch. 2 can be seen in this light as a way for a Muslim scholar to challenge this dichotomy and reclaim rationality as an intrinsic dimension of the Islamic tradition. 233 Ibid., 5.
sites, social types, practices, and encounters with India and Indians,“234 and these became supplementary tools to establish the religious identities of different Indians. The survey modality enabled the British to survey all aspects of a given region of India, from its zoology and economic produce to its people, customs, and history, all of which were “deployed by the colonial state in fixing, bounding, and settling India.”235 The enumerative modality was particularly significant for the construction of religion on an administrative level, for it is by the census that religious groups were defined and enumerated. Cohn comments:

What was entailed in the construction of the census operations was the creation of social categories by which India was ordered for administrative purposes. The British assumed that the census reflected the basic sociological facts of India. This it did, but through the enumerative modality, the project also objectified social, cultural, and linguistic differences among the peoples of India. The panoptical view that the British were constructing led to the reification of India as a polity in which conflict, from the point of view of the rulers, could only be controlled by the strong hand of the British.236

Since the census designations were by religion, South Asians had to choose and tick off one religion they belonged to. Thus, the British had with one stroke officially abolished the not uncommon phenomenon of belonging in different ways to multiple religious traditions or adhering to religious traditions/panths that were not officially recognized in the census.237 South Asians were henceforth condemned to be either Hindus, Muslims, or one of the few other

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234 Ibid., 7.
235 Ibid., 8.
236 Ibid.
237 For more on the census in British India and the way it influenced the classification of religions, see N. Gerald Barrier, The Census in British India: New Perspectives (New Delhi: Manohar, 1981), especially the chapters “Religious Identity and the Indian Census” by Kenneth W. Jones and “The Census of India as a Source for the Historical Study of Religion and Caste” by Frank F. Conlon.
recognized religions, such as Christian, Parsi (Zoroastrian), and eventually Sikh. Processes of what Sila-Khan calls “Sanskritization” and “Ashrafization” among Hindus and Muslims were likely already happening without colonial interference. What this entailed was that communities practicing localized religious traditions were increasingly coming under the influence of the elite traditions associated with the Brahmans and the *ashrāf* due to the prestige of the latter. What British classification of Indians into religious categories did was to speed up and consolidate this process but also to enshrine it using Enlightenment forms of rationality. The debates between Nānautvī and Dayananda would not have been possible without this reification, which differentiated the religious traditions of South Asia, reconfiguring them into precisely defined systems of belief and practice that not only did not overlap but were fundamentally opposed to each other. This, in turn created corporate religious identities among South Asians themselves, as we will see further below, that focused on the assertion of difference as a way of making space for one’s own identity in a multi-religious context also challenged by secular identities. In this process, however, other factors such as the proselytism of Christian missionaries and the mapping of other religions on the model of Christianity by European scholars and Orientalists also played a significant role.

Geoffrey Oddie describes some of these processes regarding the Indian religions, which are also applicable to Islam in India, and the modern development of the idea of religions as rival and rigidly self-enclosed systems:

> Imbedded in the notion that Indian religions or ‘Hinduism’ was one among a number of world systems, was the idea that it shared with them certain

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238 As the work by Mandair referenced above details, the construction of Sikhism as a separate religion was a quite arbitrary process negotiated between different groups of Sikhs and the British when some followers of the Sikh *panth* refused to be subsumed under the category of Hinduism.

239 See Sila-Khan, 51-65.
characteristics. It was, first and foremost, an objective ‘system’ which like all religious systems was an echo of the Christian model. All religions, including ‘Hinduism’, had boundaries which separated them from rival systems; and marking the boundaries between Hinduism and other religions eventually became one of the functions of the census commissioners at a later date. Religions were unified systems internally coherent with parts that depended on each other; so, for example, ‘Hinduism’ was like the workings of a clock…In all religions, according to this view, there were elites (usually priests) who controlled everything from the top down. There were sacred texts or writings…and there was a belief system or ‘creed’, including something like an essence or hard core of belief…that was its chief characteristic.240

The process that Oddie describes represents another strand, one of the most important, in the construction of modern religious identities and religious conflict and competition in South Asia. Cohn had commented that prior to all the investigative modalities that the British employed, there was the production of knowledge on India by British scholars.241 The scholarly construction of Hinduism and Islam by Orientalists and of the modern concept of religion which was then applied onto the individual religions analogous to the model of genus and species by scholars of comparative religions was a central move in the creation of modern South Asian religious identities. The religious categories described by Orientalists came, as was the case with other European forms of knowledge introduced under colonial rule, to be internalized and reproduced by South Asians themselves.242

Certain specific practices employed in British Orientalism can be pinpointed for their contribution to the differentiation of Hindu and Islamic traditions in South Asia. The a priori British Orientalist categorization of Indian religions into strict “high tradition” forms of

241 Cohn, 4-5.
242 For a critical examination of the role of Orientalism in producing knowledge about India, see Inden, Imagining India. In an influential study on Orientalism, modern categories of religion, and how Europeans have studied the Indian religions, Richard King discusses how the modern study of Hinduism and of religion was produced out of Christian, Enlightenment, and Orientalist perspectives: Richard King, Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and ‘The Mystic East’ (London: Routledge, 1999).
“Hinduism” and “Islam” led to both the differentiation and homogenization of these traditions. In order to classify the messy hybridity and fluidity of the religious landscape of colonial India, the British posited “pure” and “pristine” forms of Hinduism and Islam of which the myriad local variations were degradations. The identification of Hindu traditions with Sanskrit and of Islamic traditions with Arabic and Persian—an identification that came to be institutionalized in British educational policy in India—further led to the differentiation of Hindu and Muslim religious traditions from each other, and to the marginalization of religious traditions that differed from the official orthodox constructs, or to the incorporation of these forms into the “high tradition.” This mapping of “high” and “low”, and pure and adulterated traditions came to be championed by Hindu and Muslim reformers and fundamentalist movements. Through them, it contributed to new interpretations of Hinduism and Islam in which they were defined ever more narrowly and increasingly exclusionary of the multiplicity of interpretations, much less interaction with other religious traditions. Localized and pluralistic interpretations becoming marginalized also meant that there was less and less scope and possibility for Hindus and Muslims to communicate in the interpenetrative ways outlined by Sila-Khan above.

**Orientalism, Anglicism, and the Christian Missionary Critique of South Asian Religions**

Now, let us turn to another of the colonial experiences that directly contributed to the emergence of what I call “oppositional religion” in South Asia. While religious and mythological ideas, narratives, and practices had been an important part of the South Asian social imaginary in pre-modern times, with certain exceptions, they had been experienced as facets of culture, not as self-standing propositional truths that were either right or wrong and interminably in competition with other claims to propositional truth. It is this transformation that brings us to the roots of the
first public theological debates between Hindus and Muslims in India. In order to understand this transformation, we have to pay attention to the central role played by Christian missionaries in aggressively introducing new ways of imagining and defining religion into the South Asian religious landscape. It was the combination of Christian missionary rhetoric with the discourses and spaces of colonial modernity that allowed a religious public sphere shaped by competition to emerge.

British Orientalism may have played an important role in mapping the culture and religious traditions of South Asia, which were used by the colonial regime for the tasks of classification and control we saw above. It did, however, possess another side that is sometimes overlooked in postcolonial literature. This was the sympathy and even affection that the Orientalist vision of India, as seen in the work of men like the polymath linguist and scholar Sir William Jones (1746-1794), had for South Asian knowledge traditions. This resulted in British efforts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to preserve Indian high culture through the cultivation of classical languages and the establishment of educational institutions that dispensed classical Indian learning. Delhi College was one college among many established through such efforts. Its British staff had an eminent interest in preserving and translating classical Muslim texts and literature and bringing them in conversation with British knowledge.243 Against this sympathetic current, there was an oppositional current, that of Anglicism, which saw little of value in indigenous South Asian culture, learning, and religion, and advocated the imparting of English norms, values, and learning to the benighted Indian natives. Perhaps the most celebrated of this form of sentiment is encapsulated in Lord Thomas Macauley’s Minute on Indian Education to the British parliament, in which he asserted that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the

243 See Chapter 1 for more on Delhi College and Mamlūk ʿAlī.
whole native literature of India and Arabia.” Although Anglicism was championed by British liberals, such as the aforementioned James Mill, it found an unexpected bedfellow in Evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christians in Britain, in the midst of their own religious revival, saw the British mission in India as not merely economic exploitation and political rule but as a God-given opportunity for an evangelization of the subcontinent which was sunk in heathenism and backwardness and needed the spiritual renewal of Evangelical Christianity. This fit nicely with the liberal Anglicist aim to reform and modernize India. For in both cases, the method would be to actively intervene and challenge the religious traditions of South Asia, whether with the purpose of bringing Indians to Christianity or liberal modernity. Fully backing the Orientalist camp, the British government had initially strongly opposed any kind of intervention in the religions and customs of the natives, as it could lead to religious and political unrest. A chief example of this had been not allowing Christian missionaries to freely operate in India. However, the political tide was turning in Britain itself and after much debate, the Anglicists won out in this contentious episode of Anglo-Indian history known as the Orientalist-Anglicist controversy.244 In 1813, parliament opened the gates to Christian missionary activity in India, with monumental results for local religious traditions.

Christian missionaries immediately began to target Hindu traditions, focusing not only on theological error but even more strongly on the supposed moral degeneration of Hindu rituals, religious practices, and idolatry. These attacks were many and wide-ranging, and were to be followed in time by Hindu responses to Christianity, arguably the first historical instance of

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244 For a very useful overview of the Orientalist-Anglicist debate with many supporting primary documents from both sides, see Martin Moir and Lynn Zastoupil, The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843 (New York: Routledge, 1999).
polemics against other religions by self-identified Hindus. By the 1830s, Christian missionaries had also begun to try to attack Islam in a bid to attract converts among Muslims, this process leading up to the celebrated 1853 debate between the German Pietist missionary Karl Pfander (1803-1865) and the Muslim ʿālim Mawlānā Raḥmat Allāh Kairānvī (1818-1891) in Lucknow. Kairānvī was able to get the better of the seasoned Pfander, who had written several works against Islam, by the arguments provided by his companion at the debate, Dr. Wazīr Khān, who, in his studies in London had become acquainted with the new field of modern European higher biblical criticism, which Pfander was unfamiliar with. Kairānvī was likely the first and most influential Muslim scholar to use modern European higher biblical criticism as a tool for Muslim polemics against Christianity. His work against Christianity Izhār al-Ḥaqq was translated into many Islamic languages and became a standard work of polemics all over the Islamic world, as Muslims were debating Christians everywhere with the spread of colonialism and Western power. Kairānvī’s utilization of the new biblical criticism became an important technique for other Muslims debating Christians as it could easily be used to bolster the Qur’anic claim of textual corruption (taḥrīf) in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. These techniques of using biblical criticism to support claims of taḥrīf were consistently used by Nānautvī in his debates with Christians.

The critique of Christian missionaries became a central component of nineteenth-century Hindu and Muslim movements in South Asia. Paradoxically, this meant that in responding to Christian criticisms, South Asians came to often inadvertently adopt the terms of their discourse, as we

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245 For a good study of the Christian critique of Hinduism in colonial India, see Ankur Barua, Debating ‘Conversion’ in Hinduism and Christianity (New York: Routledge, 2015).
will see in the case of idolatry. This influence was more pronounced among Hindus, who were being subjected to an alien religion and its novel discourse for the very first time, in comparison with Muslims, whose very scripture had critiqued Christian views and who could look to the resources of a long tradition of debate with Christians. But even for Muslims, the circumstances were novel in many ways with the rise of Protestantism, its new theological categories, and the link between Christianity and colonial rule. Among Hindus, the most significant response to Christian missionary activity by Swami Dayananda, the founder of the most successful Hindu reformist movement of late nineteenth-century India, the Arya Samaj.\textsuperscript{247} Dayananda became an ascetic early in his life and even before encountering Christianity, exhibited iconoclastic tendencies towards traditional Hindu practices and interpretations, which he criticized as degenerate.\textsuperscript{248} His chief mature work \textit{Satyarsh Prakash}\textsuperscript{249} was an articulation and championing of Vedic religion based solely on the Vedas combined with an aggressive criticism of all non-Vedic religions, which included all later Hindu traditions as well as Christianity and Islam. Despite his avowed antipathy to Christianity and debates with Christian missionaries, Dayananda’s perspective bears a strong similitude to the concerns of Protestant Christianity and repeats many Protestant critiques of Hinduism. This can be seen in his vehement rejection of the traditional Hinduism of Brahmanical elites and their authority, his condemnation of the idea and practice of “idolatry”, his rejection of rituals, his proclamation that Vedic religion is the true and only monotheism, his application of the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura to the Vedas as the repository of all knowledge, and his claim that Vedic religion alone was true, infallible, and of

\textsuperscript{247} For the Arya Samaj, see Kenneth W. Jones, \textit{Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19\textsuperscript{th} Century Punjab} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).


\textsuperscript{249} For a select overview of its contents, see Salmond, 71-89.
divine origin, all other religions being false and man-made. This deep internalization of modern Christian categories made Dayananda’s vision a near perfect amalgamation of the concerns of the Orientalist camp with the critiques of the Anglicist camp. It combined the advocacy of the Orientalist idea of a pure golden age Hinduism of the Vedas with the rejection of the traditions and customs of contemporary Hinduism made by the Anglicists and Christian missionaries. Among Muslims, the closest counterpart to the Arya Samaj was the Aḥmadiyya movement of Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad of Qādiān, which combined a deep combativeness towards Christian critiques of Islam with a radical reinterpretation of the classical Islamic tradition. Like that of Dayananda, Ghulām Aḥmad’s religious vision could only be forged in the competitive and oppositional religious public sphere of colonial India.

The Christian missionary critique of South Asian religion and the responses it engendered should be further seen in the light of the rise of the public sphere in colonial India, or more aptly, the emergence of “public arenas” of discourse. The missionary criticisms and the Hindu and Muslim responses as well as intra-religious polemics among Hindus and Muslims were a central component in the formation of public arenas where religious identity and religious difference were increasingly established and articulated. The issues that the missionaries raised, such as monotheism and idolatry, which we will look further at below, became general topics of discourse among and between religious traditions in South Asia. A discourse on religion fashioned in exchange with Christian missionaries and reflective of their concerns, emerged in the public sphere. A key development indebted to Christian missionary activity was that religious

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250 There is still no study of Ghulām Aḥmad that contextualizes him in the context of nineteenth-century South Asian Islam. The most widely-cited treatment of his thought is: Yohanan Friedmann, Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), which tries to trace his ideas to the larger classical intellectual tradition and not his immediate context. It also has little to say about his polemical activities, which were a central aspect of his life and thought. A newer study, Adil Hussain Khan's From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) deals mostly with the larger Aḥmadi tradition.
communities increasingly came to defend and define themselves in debate with other religious traditions, as they also did the same vis-à-vis modern science and rationality, as introduced through British colonialism. Such a discourse came to be carried out between Hindus and Muslims (as well as other South Asian religious traditions) with or without the presence of Christian missionaries but often indicative of their discourse, as can be seen in the dialogue between Christians, Muslims, and Hindus at the *Mayla-i Khudāshināsī* (The Festival of the Knowledge of God) at Shahjahanpur—which we will examine in detail in Chapter 4—in 1875 in which Dayananda and Nanautvī both participated, and exchanges between Dayananda and Nanautvī addressing the former’s critique of Islam, which we will look at below. Such exchanges and debates came to constitute the “public face” of different religions in South Asia, a face that was not internally determined, but rather was contested and negotiated through those of other religious and philosophical perspectives.

Additional factors that went into the making of the polemical context of late nineteenth-century India were the new configurations of religious authority and the rise of print culture.\(^{251}\) Among Muslims, the loss of political authority actually led to the empowering of religious scholars unaffiliated with any political power in producing new public articulations of Islam. It also led to the diffusion of religious authority among competing groups of religious scholars, religious movements, and the modernist elite that had come into being in the post-1857 period. The expressions of these religious scholars and groups in public articulations of Islam, such as in debates with other Muslims as well as non-Muslims, in the printing of religious tracts, and in various demonstrations of piety, were markers of their religious authority to a Muslim public at a time of religious, intellectual, and social ferment. All these factors—the Orientalist

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differentiation and homogenization of religion, the Anglicist and Christian missionary critique of
religion and the responses to these critiques, the emergence of new forms of religious authority
and of public arenas for religious discourse—were together components of the new discursive
formation that South Asian religious traditions came to operate and express themselves in the
late nineteenth century.

Nānautvī’s Defense against Dayananda’s Accusation of Muslim Idolatry: Qibla-numā

Traditional Deobandi accounts of the polemical encounters between Dayananda and Nānautvī
highlight their public and novel nature. These accounts by disciples of Nānautvī who were likely
present with him during the events of the encounters, preface each of the three written works of
Nānautvī responding to the attacks of Dayananda and later, another even more aggressive Arya
Samaji missionary, the prolific Pandit Lekh Ram (1858-1897) who is best known for his
contentious debates with Ghulām Aḥmad Qādiānī. Nānautvī often did not name his own works
so the published titles of these are: Qibla-numā, which we will examine below; Intiṣār al-
Islām, which we will also briefly overview (both of these texts were responses to Dayananda);
and Javāb-i turkī bā turkī, his response to Dayananda as well as Lekh Ram. They state how
Dayananda, animated by his mission to propagate a newfangled interpretation (mażhab jadīd) of
Hindu religion rejected by Sanskrit scholars had taken it upon himself to denounce each and
every other religious interpretation as false. This he did not only through his writings, such as the
aforementioned Satyarsh Prakash, but more dramatically, through public speeches deprecating
Islamic beliefs and practices. Thus, Dayananda publicly denounced Islam through speeches at

252 Nānautvī, Qibla-numā (Deoband: Majlis Maʿārif al-Qurʾān, 1969).
253 Nānautvī, Islām awr Hindūmat yāʾī nī Intiṣār al-Islām (Lahore: Idāra-i Islāmiyyat, 1981). This was originally
published in 1880 along with Qibla-numā as they technically are one larger work divided into two. Much of the
discussion here is based on the introduction of this work, pp. 12-24, as well as Qibla-numā, pp. 19-25.
254 Barahīn-i Qāsimīyya: Javāb-i turkī bā turkī (Deoband: Majlis Maʿārif al-Qurʾān, 1967). See the introduction for
the historical circumstances leading up to these polemics, pp. 3-16.
the bazaar in the town of Roorkee—the bazaar setting denoting the presence of people from different religions and educational backgrounds. Not satisfied with what the Muslim sources describe as creating a *fitna*, an event causing moral strife, in the smaller provincial town of Roorkee, he then proceeded to do the same in the much larger town of Meeruth, drawing larger crowds. Nānautvī, after protracted but fruitless negotiations for a formal debate with Dayananda, eventually sent his disciples to answer the allegations in the same bazaar in Roorkee. After recovering from an illness that would eventually lead to his demise a short time later, he himself finally appeared to give lectures for three days to a large assembly of people of different religious affiliations and educational levels.\(^{255}\) Nānautvī’s stated reason for his actions was specifically the public nature of Dayananda’s polemical speeches, laced with theological and philosophical language the locals could not refute, which threatened to intellectually and religiously lead common people astray. Additionally, they were incendiary at a time when the boundaries between Islamic and Indian religious traditions were becoming more and more rigid, Dayananda’s polemical attitudes and activities providing an intellectual foundation to the growth of communalism in colonial India. Nānautvī’s actions were also taken to reassure the Muslim community that they and their traditions can be defended. This, in itself, is a sign of the increasing role of moral and communal authority that the ‘ulama’ had come to wield when other forms of Muslim traditional authority had declined or disappeared under colonial rule. Nānautvī had previously debated Christians and Hindus at the Festival in Shahjahanpur as mentioned above and had also written against Christian theological claims in a number of works such as *Ḥujjat al-Īslām*. After his public speeches at Roorkee, Nānautvī distilled their contents into the two works mentioned above, elaborating his response to Dayananda’s critiques. Nānautvī wrote eleven answers to eleven specific charges Dayananda had brought against Islam. Ten of these

\(^{255}\) Nānautvī also briefly describes the circumstances himself at the beginning of *Qibla-numā*, 26-30.
were collected in an untitled tract containing a series of responses to very specific metaphysical, eschatological, and ethical issues raised by Dayananda against Islam which was later published as *Intiṣār al-Islām* (The Victory of Islam).²⁵⁶ These included answers on such questions by Dayananda against Islamic views as the omnipotence of God, the existence of Satan, the legal doctrine of abrogation, the question of transmigration, actions yielding rewards in paradise, the possibility of forgiveness for sins, Muslim views on alcohol, the consumption of meat, burial of the dead, and the stages of the afterlife. The eleventh answer, far longer than the other ten put together was titled *Qibla-numā*,²⁵⁷ being a detailed theological response to Dayananda’s contention that Muslims were idolatrous due to the reverence they paid to the Ka’ba.

The structure of these two works is quite illustrative of the changes brought out by the introduction of religious and theological discourse into the modern public sphere. This was a context that was no longer an internal conversation between Muslim elites, as most of the discourse—written and oral—of Muslim scholars had been in the pre-modern era, but one in which not only lay and modern educated Muslims participated but also the lay persons and scholars of other religious traditions. This publicization of Islamic discourse that had once been their provenance alone was one of the major changes that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Muslim scholars had to address. The question raised for Nānautvī by the public presentations of complex theological ideas was how to address them in a way that would be comprehensible for the masses, many of them unlearned, and yet be intellectually rigorous for non-Muslim religious elites like Dayananda. Nānautvī’s solution in these two tracts was to provide two answers for every question, one for the ordinary people represented by the kind of people gathered in the

²⁵⁶ The compiler has added in his introduction, purportedly reflecting Nānautvī’s own opinion, that some of these responses might be equally an answer to the fallacies of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, for he and Dayananda share some errors.

²⁵⁷ A *qibla-numā* is a traditional instrument for orienting oneself to the *qibla*, the direction towards the Ka’ba.
bazaar and one for the intellectual elite represented by educated Muslim and Hindu scholars. The first answer was easy to understand, succinctly presented, and a summarized version of the second, which was much longer, more complex, and rooted in Islamic philosophical and theological traditions. One could also say that the first was relatively accessible, often remaining at a rhetorical level written for an educated public audience, and the second, as Nānautvī’s commentator Ishtiyāq Aḥmad mentions, was “based on intellectual verification (taḥqīqī) and supported by intellectual and rational proofs.” This intellectual (ʿaqlī) response was further divided into two parts: one a summary and the second detailed. These kinds of divisions show that Nānautvī was very sensitive to the notion that different people needed to be addressed differently. The situation of colonial India where Nānautvī had to simultaneously address multiple audiences, consisting of Muslim publics, other Muslim scholars and intellectuals, non-Muslim publics, and non-Muslim scholars was a novel one, but one which was to become a norm in the modern world and which Muslim scholars would have to contend with from now on. Nānautvī is very conscious of addressing himself to an audience composed not only of his co-religionists but of religious others, and states that he is using a rationalist language because his opponents do not share the religious basis of his thought. However, since this rationalist language itself was based on a particular intellectual tradition, that of Islamic Hellenistic philosophy, it had its own genealogy which was not shared by those like Dayananda whose thought was heavily influenced by Vedantic philosophical traditions as well as nineteenth-century British empiricist philosophy, nor was there as of yet a well-established standard of public reason amongst the multiplicity of intellectual and religious perspectives of colonial India. In this way, these debates can be seen as part of the attempt by religious actors in South Asia to

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258 *Qibla-numā*, 21.
establish a public reason that, unlike the secularizing developments of modern Europe, included religious discourses.

The basis for the composition of Nānautvī’s tract, *Qibla-numā*, was Dayananda’s contention that Vedic Hinduism alone was the true monotheism and Islam, like Christianity, was idolatrous. Islam’s idolatrous nature, according to Dayananda, was typified by Muslim reverence of and implied worship of the Ka’ba, a reverence which was not, he contented, very different from popular Hindu worship of idols, which Dayananda equally dismissed as antithetical to his interpretation of Vedic doctrine. A brief analysis of certain aspects of Nānautvī’s response can help us examine certain aspects of the new discursive shifts among Muslim scholars and elites as a result of the factors delineated above, and in conversation with other religious traditions. The novelty of the polemic between Dayananda and Nānautvī and its public nature has been noted by Nānautvī’s chief twentieth-century biographer, the scholar Manāżir Aḥsan Gīlānī, who states that there is very little evidence—textual or historical—of any serious polemical intellectual exchanges between Muslims and Hindus in the long history of Muslim presence. It was the originality of Dayananda’s confrontational approach towards Islam that launched this new chapter in Hindu-Muslim relations in South Asia. The debate between Nānautvī and Dayananda emerges as the first of its kind as a public polemical encounter between two major representatives of “Hinduism” and “Islam”. As such, it is a key moment in the modern consolidation of oppositional religious identities in South Asia, for it represents not only “external” impositions of new religious identities such as the colonial census but an internalization and publicization of them by the religious elites of South Asian religious traditions.

259 Manāżir Aḥsan Gīlānī, *Sawānih-i Qāsimiyya*, vol. 2.
At the beginning of Qibla-numā, Nānautvī quotes Dayananda’s critique regarding the Kaʿba: “Muslims call Hindus idolaters (but-parast) and you yourself prostrate before a place (makān) that is made of stones. Whatever response Muslims give could be repeated exactly by idolaters. Thus, Muslims are nothing less than idolaters.”260 After ridiculing Dayananda’s assertion as intellectually incoherent, Nānautvī divides his “simple” answer into seven parts, which we will examine here, and follows up with a detailed “intellectual” (aqlī) answer argued from within the ḥikma tradition. His basic answer is the argument that the Muslim approach to the Kaʿba consists simply of istiqbāl-i Kaʿba, the physical act of turning one’s face in the direction of the Kaʿba, and thus does not entail any kind of intentionality towards the Kaʿba in which it would be perceived as an object of worship as would be the case with the worship of idols. Therefore, Muslim orientation toward the Kaʿba is fundamentally different from idol worship. The first part of his seven-part answer furthers his basic contention that orienting oneself to the Kaʿba is a question of concentration (tawajjuh) and not one of worship as would be the case in idolatry. Furthermore, he uses a populist argument that again reflects the growing public nature of Islam by contending that if Dayananda was to ask any Muslim about the notion of Kaʿba worship (Kaʿba-parastī), that person would not even understand what that term meant.261 Here, Nānautvī demonstrates a key part of his methodology, which is to tear down grand statements like comparing turning to the Kaʿba with idol worship by paying close attention to linguistic terminology used by religious practitioners and the intentionality that language conveys. Also, Nānautvī, despite his championing of the ‘ulama’ as sole interpreters of the normative standard of Islamic practice against Muslim modernists such as Sayyid Ahmad Khān who challenged their interpretive authority, here, against non-Muslim opponents holds the normative understanding

260 Qibla-numā, 30.
261 Ibid.
and practice of the whole Muslim community as indicative of an integral Islamic perspective, which we have seen in *Taqrîr-i Dilpazîr* as well.

The second part of the answer is based on the notion of intention. What separates Muslim orientation towards the Ka’ba from prayer or worship is that the latter needs a corresponding intention without which it is invalid, while the former requires no intention, rather merely the turning of one’s face in a particular direction.\(^{262}\) While this distinction that Nānautvī makes may be rooted in Islamic legal definitions of intentionality, he extends the notion of intention to all forms of worship so that any form of idolatry would necessitate a corresponding intention to worship. Nānautvī argues that if any Hindu worshipper of idols was asked if such intention was necessary, he would reply affirmatively, again arguing for a communal understanding of religious normativity as well a publicly corroborated reason against what he claims are the idiosyncratic interpretations of Dayananda.

The third part of his answer is based on the unimportance of the Ka’ba in the details of Muslim worship, particularly its most important form, the canonical prayer (*salāt*). The Ka’ba’s lack of importance is demonstrated by the fact that it is never mentioned in the prayer and in any of the parts of the prayer cycle. Nānautvī individually comments on each of the parts of the prayer cycle in a detailed analysis, showing that it is directed towards God alone and is intended to glorify Him alone accompanied by the awareness of one’s own imperfection. He contrasts this with the worship of idols in which the physical idol, which has been fashioned into a particular deity like Shiva\(^{263}\) or Vishnu and is then imagined as such, is glorified.\(^{264}\) One of Nānautvī’s contentions here is that there is no ontological relation established between God and the Ka’ba

\(^{262}\) Ibid., 31-32.  
\(^{263}\) He refers to him in the text as Mahadev, a popular designation for Shiva.  
\(^{264}\) *Qibla-numā*, 32-37.
the way there is between an idol and the deity which it signifies, or rather, which it substantially becomes for the worshipper.

The fourth part of the answer refers to a difference in sacred spatiality between the Kaʿba and Hindu idols. He argues that Muslims need not be physically before the Kaʿba in order to worship God, whereas an idol needs to be present before the devotee in order to effect worship. He contends that even if the physical structure of the Kaʿba ceased to remain, the directionality of the qibla would remain intact, as it did when the Kaʿba was in fact, partially demolished in the era of ʿAbd Allāh ibn Zubayr.265 Thus, it demonstrates that the physical structure is not what Muslims worship. This stands in contrast, Nānautvī states, to ordinary Hindu practice, where the sacrality of a place is determined precisely by the presence of idols in it, so that if idols were to be moved, as sometimes happens, the temple they were stored in loses its significance and sacrality, and becomes an ordinary building. Again, the ontological identity of divinity with idols is contrasted with the Kaʿba. He supports this further by stating that for Hindus, that which is worshipped (maʿbūd), prostrated towards (masjūd), and sought after (maqṣūd) is to be found in the idol while such an intentionality is utterly absent in a Muslim’s orienting himself to the Kaʿba.266

This point about the contrast between the Kaʿba and idols is again brought out in the fifth part of the answer. Nānautvī here mentions, again asking Dayananda to pay attention to the terminology that is used, that Muslims call the Kaʿba the “house” of God, not God Himself. The Kaʿba’s being the “house” of God not God Himself shows that “the place is not that which is sought, but

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265 Ibn Zubayr (624-692) was a companion of the Prophet who established an independent caliphate in Mecca after refusing to pledge allegiance to Yazīd I. In an attack against him and his rule, which led to his death, the Umayyad army laid waste to Mecca, significantly damaging the Kaʿba in the process.

266 Qibla-numā, 37.
He who resides in the place.” Idolaters, on the other hand, do not think of idols as the “place” or “seat” of God, but substantially as God Himself in the form of Shiva, Ganesh, etc. Since idol worshippers think of these honorable beings as worthy of worship, their worship is really directed at their idols.

In the sixth part of his answer, Nānautvī reiterates His general conception of God, which is explained in more detail in Ch. 4. He states that Muslims believe that only He is worthy of worship who is Existent (mawjūd) through Himself. All others derive their existence from Him, and all good and ill is through His will alone. His Perfection (kamāl), Majesty (jalāl), and Beauty (jamāl) are essential (dhātī) and these qualities, when present in the universe, are bestowed by God alone. He suggests that if Muslims would worship anyone other than God, it would be the Prophet Muhammad, for he is greater than all humans, all angels, even the throne of God Himself, as well as the Ka’ba. However, they do not do so, for even he, God’s highest creature, can do nothing without God. In contrast, he suggests many Hindus regard God the Absolute as being utterly beyond this world and thus, it not being possible to direct worship towards Him. The affairs of this world, instead, are in the hands of the trinity of Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu and it is they that Hindus worship. Here, Nānautvī seems to be arguing that if one understood the whole conception of God for Muslims adequately, it would be impossible to compare it with the ordinary beliefs of Hindus.

The seventh part of his answer relies on a subtle discussion of the Ashʿarī theological relationship between actor (fāʾil), act (fiʿl), and what is acted upon (mafʿūl) with the significant

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267 Ibid., 39.
268 Ibid., 39-40.
269 See Ch. 4 for a detailed analysis of Nānautvī’s use of the Avicennan idea of the Necessary Being, whose essence and existence are one.
270 Qibla-numā, 40-44
conclusion that orientation toward the Ka’ba does not depend on any form of knowledge, faith, or certainty, rather only on the command of God. Contrasting this with idol worship, Nānautvī said that the latter requires intellectual certainty (yaqīn), that the idol is worthy of worship while Muslims turn to the Ka’ba only due to God’s commanding them to do so. The theological reason that God has established the Ka’ba as the orientation of Muslims is that it is a tajallīgah-i rabbānī, a locus of divine theophany. It is this point that Nānautvī laboriously examines in his second, ‘aqlī answer to Dayananda’s contentions. God, he states, is free of any directionality (jiḥat) and the human being, a physical being, is bound by directionality; this is the reason humanity was given a direction for worship. If it was permitted to worship in any direction one chooses, there would be no possibility of order (intīzām) and unity (ittīfāq) amongst human beings.271 Thus, the intention of Muslims in turning towards the Ka’ba is worship of God and direction is given by God in order to eliminate spiritual obstacles and unite and organize the community. Here, Nānautvī interestingly combines a mystical interpretation of the Ka’ba as a locus of divine theophany with a rationalist explanation of the function of the Ka’ba in Muslim worship.

This combination of theological, philosophical, and mystical modes of reasoning is central to Nānautvī’s larger intellectual methodology and to the intellectual tradition he can be situated in, that of hikma combined with late Sunni philosophical theology which flourished particularly in South Asia, as we saw in Ch. 2. For our purposes, the significance of Nānautvī’s being rooted in this tradition is that through it, he was able to access a form of rationality that claimed to stand above particular religious frameworks and provide objectivity. In an intellectual landscape of competing religions, competing intra-Muslim interpretations, and the clash between traditional

271 Ibid., 46-52.
and modern modes of knowing, Nānautvī applied the categories of this philosophical theology in order to argue his points. Whether or not his opponents always understood these arguments or found them convincing may not be the most important question; what he accomplished was to articulate a methodology for an influential modern Islamic discourse which relied on certain forms of reasoning—drawn from this tradition of philosophical theology—to express the meaning of Muslim beliefs and practices in public arenas that relied on rational arguments. It may be illuminating to compare Nānautvī’s application of a form of Islamic reason to emergent questions in a modern colonial polemical milieu with the attempt of Muslim modernists like al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh, and in South Asia, Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and later, Iqbāl, to resurrect aspects of classical Muslim theological and philosophical perspectives to respond to the challenge of modernity. The similarities and differences between them would be able to help us see more clearly the multiplicity of Muslim uses of rationality and avoid the tendency to equate rationality and modernity.

In addition to Nānautvī’s rational mode of argument, his invocation of Hindu practices and texts is striking. This familiarity with the texts of one’s opponents is one of the new strategies developed by Muslim scholars to successfully debate with non-Muslim opponents in the modern public sphere. We have seen how Kairānvī used knowledge of the modern criticism of Christian scriptural texts, which was also adopted by Nānautvī in his debates with Christians. Dayananda himself, influenced by a Protestant focus on scripture used Qur’anic texts to refute Islam. Nānautvī similarly used Hindu texts to answer Dayananda but in more creative ways. Nānautvī’s use of the Hindu tradition in his works was multifarious: he used it to make contrasts with Islamic norms, while at other times he invoked it against Dayananda’s novel interpretations, portraying them as antithetical to traditional Brahmanical positions or to popular Hindu practice.
Surprisingly, he even sometimes utilizes traditional Hindu views as supporting the Islamic position on a particular point against what he decries as Dayananda’s idiosyncratic and often modernist positions. In *Intišār al-Islām*, for example, he used texts from the Vedas and the Hindu epics, particularly the Mahabharata, to confirm the Islamic position on issues Dayananda criticized. To give one example out of many, Dayananda, holding a strong interpretation of karmic doctrine, had argued that the idea of repentance and forgiveness from sins was invalid. Nānautvī states in response, knowing full well Dayananda’s particular interpretation of Hinduism:

> Perhaps the Pandit [Dayananda] might not consider other books legitimate, but regarding the four Vedas, he has expressed in our correspondence that there is not one word which is faulty in them. So: in the Atharva Veda, it is written that the remembrance of the rememberer [of God] wipes out the sins of lifetimes. If justice was only served by punishment [as Dayananda had argued], then how is this wiping out possible without punishment.272

Nānautvī’s use of the Islamic rational tradition and of Hindu religious texts highlights the discursive shifts encountered by Muslim scholars and theologians in a modern context of religious rivalry in the public sphere where reason and a thorough knowledge of the opponent’s tradition become central to a successful defense and advocacy of one’s own tradition. In responding to Dayananda’s criticisms, Nānautvī was forging a theological discourse which would frame various aspects of Islamic doctrine and practice in a new manner cognizant of the critiques of Hindus and Christians, and which would itself affect Muslim self-understanding and identity. Modern Muslim revivalism in South Asia, of which Nānautvī was a chief exponent as founder of the Deoband *madrasa*, was forged in a crucible in which its discursive norms were

272 *Intišār al-Islām*, 77.
framed in conversation—or rather, debate—with other religious traditions as well as an emergent modernism, and not merely the latter as many studies of Islamic reform and revival assert.

Concluding Reflections

To conclude, let us briefly return to the issue of idolatry discussed above and trace the genealogy of its construction in the colonial era and the discursive shifts that occurred as an example of the transformations of religious and intellectual categories in nineteenth-century South Asia. Such transformations were paralleled by similar developments in multiple colonial and modernizing contexts. The contention over the issue of idolatry specifically arose with the arrival of Christian missionaries in India. They targeted idolatry through both ethical and theological arguments as the root of the heathenism and ignorance that they believed engulfed Hindu India. By this stigmatization of idolatry, the boundaries of the discourse regarding it began to be set. It was following this that Dayananda began to articulate a new vision of Vedic Hinduism which internalized the Christian critique and made the criticism and eradication of “idolatry” a central part of his campaign of Hindu reform. As a corollary to his anti-idolatry pronouncements was his championing of monotheism, itself reflective of Christian missionary discourse of opposing idolatry’s ignorance through monotheism’s enlightenment. He was able to find such a monotheist perspective validated in the Upanishadic interpretation of the Vedas. This vision of Dayananda was combined with his contention, again based on the model of oppositional religion introduced through Christian missionaries and the colonial British understanding of religion, that Vedic religion represented the only truth. All other religions, whether of Indian origin, like Buddhism, Jainism, or even conventional Hinduism, or of foreign origin, like Christianity and
Islam, became fallacies. Subverting the Christian missionary critique of Hinduism which denigrated idolatry and preached monotheism, he applied the same criteria to not only Christianity but also Islam. The Muslim response, as expressed by Nānautvī, stressed the monotheism of Islam and identified idolatry essentially with Hinduism. A discourse among the three religious traditions was thus consolidated in which each, despite very varying theological beliefs, claimed monotheism as their own true identity and decried idolatry as characterizing the others. In such a situation, the terms “monotheism” and “idolatry” lose their normative meanings and become terms of contestation between religions. To apply Jonathan Z. Smith’s distinction from his seminal essay “What a Difference a Difference Makes”, a shift has been made from an “ontological” understanding of idolatry and monotheism to a relational and situational one, much as the other is now seen not only as the other ontologically but relationally.273 Simply put, the traditional Muslim discourse regarding the other, that of islām and kufr has given way to a discourse about “Islam” and “Hinduism”, or “Islam” and “Christianity” corresponding to the conversion of relatively fluid religious traditions into tightly bounded “religions” in a modern sense. Smith’s taxonomy of how religious selves relate to religious others argues that the “proximate other” is where contention arises and not the “merely other” who is impenetrably different. The binary islām/kufr was an issue of an other that was wholly “Not-Like-Us”, and therefore inconsequential. But a classification that treats the different religious traditions as species of the same genus of “religion” and therefore in competition as equals, as developed in the public arenas of colonial India, results in every tradition being “Too-Much-Like-Us” or as the shifting debates on monotheism and idolatry show, claiming to “Be-Us”, thus laying the ground for the development of “a theory of the other”. But as Smith states: A “theory of the

other” is but another way of phrasing a “theory of the self”.\footnote{Ibid., 275.} Thus, for Hindus and Muslims in colonial India, the other went from being a “mere other” who did not speak and did not threaten and who, therefore, could be neatly classified in one’s own epistemic categories to being a “proximate other” who could speak and challenge, and against whose otherness one’s own identity needed to be defined. Thus, modern Hindu and Muslim revivalism were born from a discourse of religious otherness and difference that directly shaped self-identity in turn.
Chapter Four: Interreligious Debates and Public Theology: A Description and Analysis of Nānautvī’s Theological Apologetics at Shahjahanpur

Introduction

The evolution of the modern public sphere transformed and reconfigured Muslim religious discourse in its mode of production and consumption as well as in its content. An important example of this development is the public theology of Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī. Nānautvī was rooted in the Walī Allāhī tradition and a particular expression of it as it crystallized in early Deobandism. Yet his apologetic theology represents an attempt to reformulate the discursive boundaries of Islamic philosophical theology in the fluid modern context of colonial India, in a manner which is both consistent with tradition and engaging of modernity. In this he stands in contrast to Muslim modernists who borrowed elements from the classical tradition that suited their own arguments but made no consistent attempt to be holistically rooted in that tradition; and also to those traditionalists and later “fundamentalists” who minimized or eschewed any engagement with the modern to the extent possible.

In this chapter, we will examine in detail Nānautvī’s elaboration of an Islamic philosophical theology for the public. The context of his articulation of this theology is that of interreligious polemics and debates carried out between members of different religious traditions in the newly emergent public sphere. This examination will use two primary sources. Firstly, the proceedings of the Festival for the Knowledge of God (Mayla-i Khudāshināsī), compiled and published as

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275 A chief early exemplar of this tendency in India is Sayyid Ahmad Khān.
276 Nānautvī’s friend and co-founder of Deoband, Rashīd Ahmad Gangohī provides an example of such an early traditionalist perspective and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth school founded by Siddīq Hasan Khān (1832-1890) provides an early “fundamentalist” perspective.
The Festival was centered around an interreligious debate, perhaps the first of its kind, to be conducted three-way between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians, in which Nānautvī participated and pithily laid out the core of his philosophical theology. Secondly, a publication, *Ḥujjat al-Islām*, one of Nānautvī’s most well-known works and itself an important work of theological apologetics, which he wrote in preparation for the Festival and which often contains a more detailed, but less concise, analysis of the central points he made there. This work, as many of Nānautvī’s writings, was published posthumously; it was arranged and given its name by his student Fakhr al-Ḥasan. If the works examined in the last chapter, *Qibla-numā* and *Intiṣār al-Islām*, were written in response to Hindu polemics against Islamic doctrines and practices, *Ḥujjat al-Islām*, and to a large extent his speeches and responses recorded in *Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr*, were aimed firstly at Christianity. But their central purpose is undoubtedly the elaboration of a comprehensive apologetics for Islam which could justify traditional Islamic doctrines and practices in a religiously competitive modern public sphere. The purpose of such a justification was multifold: to defend Islamic beliefs and practices from the polemics of others, to create a space for Islam and the Muslim community in a pluralistic public sphere, to consolidate a Muslim identity and community vis-à-vis other emergent communities of discourse, to establish the ‘ulama’ as central spokesmen for Islam and the Muslim community at a time when lay Muslim voices as well as non-Muslims, whether the British colonial regime, Christian missionaries, or Hindu reformers, were increasingly beginning

\(^{278}\) Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī, *Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr* (Karachi, 1977). This, like most of Nānautvī’s published works has been printed and reprinted in various editions in India and Pakistan.

\(^{279}\) Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī, *Ḥujjat al-Islām* (Deoband, 1967). This edition, published as part of celebrating the hundred year anniversary of the founding of Deoband by republishing classical works of early Deobandis, is accompanied by a lengthy commentary by Ishfiyāḥ Ahmad, an Indian Deobandi scholar and theologian.

\(^{280}\) It should be noted that many of the works of Nānautvī are not actually named by him, but by students and compilers who published them after his early death. It is relevant in light of our discussion of the emergence of the modern usage of “Islam” as religion that Nānautvī himself did not often use the term Islam but rather the classical *dīn*, nor did he title his works *Intiṣār al-Islām* or *Ḥujjat al-Islām*. His students’ choosing these titles is itself a reflection of the rise of the shift from the classical usage to the modern sense of Islam as a religion among others.
to define “Islam”, and to construct an alternative public discourse which could challenge the rationalistic and empiricist worldview of colonial modernity on its own ground.

After examining the role of the ‘ulama‘ in the public sphere of colonial India and analyzing the context of the Festival held at Shahjahanpur, most of this chapter will offer a close reading and thick description of the contents of Nānautvī’s speech at the Festival, supported in some places by related remarks that he makes in Ḥujjat al-Islām. This will complement the written works we have examined in the last two chapters as an example of the oral discourses Nānautvī articulated in a public setting. It will also provide a fuller understanding of the full scope of Nānautvī’s theological apologetics and the way that he translated his principal theological concerns into a language fit for the public arena.

The ‘Ulama‘ in the Public Sphere in Colonial India

The ‘ulama‘, as mentioned in chapter one, should not be viewed as being marginalized and losing their previous position of authority at the onset of colonialism and modernity. Rather, this oft-repeated perspective in modernist historiography in which they function as passive spectators trying to unsuccessfully preserve their fading glory must be counteracted with the observation that if the ‘ulama‘ lost certain advantages, such as patronage by the state and a public culture strongly molded by Islamic norms, they also gained new ones which they very actively used to their own purposes. It can, in fact, be argued that the ‘ulama‘ were major beneficiaries in the loss of power of other Muslim political and cultural elites because they were then able to fill the vacuum. In an atmosphere where Muslims were fast losing their traditional authority structures in South Asia, the ‘ulama‘ came to fill the gap by positioning themselves as public spokesmen
for Islam and the Muslim community, and as moral authorities that that community could center itself around.

The ‘ulama’ were able to do this by laying claim to the emergent public sphere through a variety of strategies. These included: the launching of mass public movements dedicated to the preservation of Islam and the Muslim community; translations and publication of classical Islamic works and the composition of new ones; the founding of schools oriented to new forms of education; and public debates through print and in person, with both non-Muslims and Muslims who held differing viewpoints. Metcalf writes:

The result of both debate and publication was a substantial increase in the audience of such religious leaders as the ‘ulamā’. Their teachings and opinions achieved ever-wider currency, and the intellectual orientations they represented were increasingly considered the defining characteristics of rival groups.

The ‘ulama’ thus came to be key participants in the construction of a Muslim public that was ever more aware of the Islamic tradition and its resources, its own increasingly religiously-defined identity, and the difference of that identity from other identities. They came to play an important role which negotiated and defined the Islamic tradition for Muslims and increasingly,

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281 These include such movements with completely variant goals as: the reformation and jihad movement of Sayyid Aḥmad Barelvī; the movement to preserve devotional and popular Sufi Islam initiated by Aḥmad Razā Khān Barelvī; and in the early twentieth century, the Khilāfat movement and the founding of the influential political organization Jamāʿat-i ʿUlamā-i Hind formed by ‘ulama’ of different persuasions to represent the interests of the Muslim community. For a discussion of two such projects by ‘ulama’ of different schools to revive the Muslim community in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India, see Fuad S. Naeem, “Sufism and Revivalism in South Asia: Mawīnī Ashraf ‘Alī Thānvī of Deoband and Mawīnī Aḥmad Razā Khān of Bareilly and Their Paradigms of Islamic Revivalism,” *Muslim World* 99:3 (2009): 435-51.


283 The foremost example of this among the ‘ulama’ is the school of Deoband itself.


non-Muslims, in the public sphere. They thus came to represent, more so than in the past, a central source for the certainties of tradition for Muslims in a climate of massive change, and to represent and define Islam in a contested public setting where it was being constantly defined and redefined by different actors with different agendas.

**Interreligious Debates and the Construction of Public Theology**

As we have seen, interreligious debates emerged in nineteenth-century colonial India as a powerful means for different religious communities and their representatives to define themselves and their religious traditions in an emergent and pluralistic public sphere. The Festival of the Knowledge of God (*Mayla-i Khudāshināsī*) between Muslims, Hindus, and Christians held in Shahjahanpur on two occasions in 1875 and 1876, in which Nānautvī was a key participant, can serve as an illustrative example of the development of public arenas of discourse in colonial India and particularly the creation of religious publics. These religious publics were both spectators and participants in the construction of what can be called public theologies of the different religious traditions competing in the emergent public sphere of colonial India. The religious publics were spectators in the sense that they were mainly watching elites of the participating religious traditions present their religious traditions, answer questions, and debate with each other. They were participants in the sense that this was not just a private session of religious elites, even if they were of multiple religious traditions, but a public event that catered in principle and in practice to its audience in its mode of presentation, its choice of topics, and very importantly, in its distillation of a complex theological tradition into publicly-accessible and digestible arguments. The Festival can be contrasted in this light to earlier
religious exchanges and debates in India such as those between Sufis and yogis that were confined to a spiritual elite\textsuperscript{286} or those between Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jains, and others at the court of Akbar, in so much as these were elite conversations that the public did not have access to and which could only impact their lives if translated into official policy by the emperor.\textsuperscript{287}

As for the term public theology, it signifies a new mode of discourse constructed specifically for public presentations of religious beliefs and practices, and also implies a role for the public in the construction of new theological languages, whether this role is construed as receptive—as in the case of the Festival—or active/creative—as in cases where non-elites have emerged as a public to argue for particular religious positions. As such, public theologies are products of the modern public sphere and the specific colonial separation between state and religion, which in colonial South Asia meant not a privatization of religious belief, but the construction of a “religious public arena” separate from the domains of the government as well as private lives, though the separation was not complete in either case.\textsuperscript{288} This public arena was one of contestation between different forms of religious belief and also between different interpretations within the same religious tradition.

Out of this contestation emerged public theologies that aimed to define what “Islam”, “Hinduism”, or “Christianity” were, and what the public consequences of this definition were in


\textsuperscript{287} See Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, “Religious Disputation and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar’s Ibadatkhana,” \textit{Studies in History} 24:2 (2008): 195-209, for an argument that situates these debates as an earlier instance, in the context of Mughal imperial policy, of the debate between reason and tradition discussed in Ch. 2. Also see S.A.A.Rizvi, \textit{Religious and intellectual history of the Muslims in Akbar’s reign, with special reference to Abu’l Fazl, 1556-1605} (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975), for further description of these debates.

\textsuperscript{288} For more on the “religious” public sphere, see Dietrich Reetz, \textit{Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India, 1900-1947} (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
the form of correct modes of belief and practice. Public theologies became central components of the public “face” of religious traditions and determined the manner in which these traditions were understood and presented in the public domain mediated by print, debates, and new educational institutions among other things. From this, we can surmise that public theologies were central in the construction of the modern understanding of “religion”, and in our example, “Islam”. This was an “Islam” that was not simply the product of a millennial tradition of Muslim scholars and their deliberations over how to internally understand that tradition, but one where Muslim scholars, non-Muslim critics, and Muslim and non-Muslim publics all participated in a shared space to contest the contours of and define/redefine “Islam”. As Metcalf has stated of the increasing participation of the public in competitive religious discourses: “…the very competition helped create a familiarity with religious issues that was unprecedented in Indian history.”

Although they confine themselves to discussing how Muslims themselves have reconfigured Islamic traditions and do not touch upon the pluralistic and increasingly global scope of who defines Islam, Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelmann, two of the most prolific authors working on the subject of Islam and the public sphere, coin the useful term “Public Islam” for the kinds of developments we are discussing here. They write:

“Public Islam” refers to the highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, and many others make to civic debate and public life. In this “public” capacity, “Islam” makes a difference in configuring the politics and social life of large parts of the globe, and not just for self-ascribed religious authorities. It makes this difference not only as a template for ideas and practices but also as a way of envisioning alternative

289 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 123.
political realities and, increasingly, in acting on both global and local stages, thus reconfiguring established boundaries of civil and social life.\footnote{Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelmann, eds., \textit{Public Islam and the Common Good} (Leiden: Brill, 2004), xii.}

In the case of Nānautvī in colonial India, participating in public interreligious debates allowed him to both define Islam for a multi-religious public audience and also to defend it against its critics. His trump card, in a sense, was his use of rationality to present Islam and answer its detractors, a mode which, as we have seen, he developed from the tradition of \textit{ḥikma} as elaborated by Shāh Walī Allāh but was also eminently suitable to the Habermasian notion of a modern public sphere conditioned by rational debate. Whether his presentations of Islam were convincing to his opponents or not,\footnote{I have been unable to locate non-Muslim assessments of Nānautvī beyond those described in \textit{Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr} and other works that have a clearly hagiographic interpretation of Nānautvī’s success with convincing non-Muslims.} he could nonetheless claim that his perspective was not based on accepted Islamic tradition but on a shared rationality. That the conditions for this shared rationality were the secularizing colonial modernity of British empire only goes to demonstrate how modern notions of religion, even when argued by the representatives of tradition like the ‘ulama’, developed within a particular secular context that had already defined “religion” as a separate sphere from the rest of human life and activities.

Elaborating this point, SherAli Tareen, in an essay on the interreligious debates at Shahjahanpur has argued that they were made possible by “the secularizing conditions of British colonial modernity.”\footnote{SherAli Tareen, “The Polemic of Shāhjahānpūr: Religion, Miracles, and History,” \textit{Islamic Studies} 51:1 (2012): 63.} He identifies these as the emergence of a public sphere in which the state managed and patronized public religious debates, the new concept of religion defined by propositional truth claims, and a new subject able to judge competing truth claims, in addition to the new technologies of a capitalist economy. While Tareen’s description is undoubtedly useful,
it understates the role of indigenous actors in the construction and flourishing of these new developments. The modern public sphere in India may have emerged largely due to the conditions of British colonial modernity, but it also quickly became a site for discourses that were an alternative to the reigning intellectual paradigms of British colonial rule. Religious actors like Nānautvī and Dayananda were able to utilize these new developments to define and elaborate their traditions and communities publicly in an environment hostile to their flourishing. They were able to converse on and debate topics that defied the secularizing ethos of colonialism with its claims to modern forms of truth found in empiricism, rationalism, and emergent technology. Through debates, publications, education, and public organizations, they were able to develop modes of discourse that reaffirmed an “enchanted” world in which religious doctrines and ideals were the criteria for truth, ethics, and the thriving of society; not modern science, philosophy, and capitalism.

In the case of Nānautvī, the Islamic tradition of philosophical theology and hikma became a means of articulating an alternative mode of rationality: one in which truth claims are embedded in a metaphysical and “enchanted” worldview largely shared by the colonized public and where the rational can be a means of more deeply understanding and defending the supra-rational. This helped to create an epistemic space where religious language was able to find a place in a public discourse that would otherwise be in the control of a colonial regime, which in the eyes of many Muslims and Hindus, was promoting both secular modernity and Christianity, the latter by giving free reign to missionaries. Thus, Nānautvī was not merely unwittingly “conscripted” by modernity, as Tareen suggests, but was also actively involved in creating spaces in the modern
public sphere for specifically non-modern, and religious, discourses\textsuperscript{293}. This can be seen as part of the process of recovery on the part of Muslim scholars after the Muslim loss of power and control under British rule: the claim to a greater and more comprehensive knowledge as a means of challenging colonial and modernist paradigms. It can be argued that Nānautvī, through his synthesis of the “enchanted” perspective of religion and rationality, was challenging the “regimes of truth,”\textsuperscript{294} to use Michel Foucault’s term, formulated under British rule. For Foucault, it is through the establishment of “regimes of truth” that discourses can be produced, which function as true in historically-specific contexts. In British India, such regimes of truth were established by the colonial regime through a combination of claims to truth and to power. Adding Foucault’s observation of the interconnectedness of knowledge and power, we can say that Nānautvī and others like him, by challenging the truths that colonial modernity prided itself on, were thereby also challenging its power.

\textsuperscript{293} The religious dimension of the development of the public sphere in colonial India is suggested by Peter Van Der Veer. He discusses how the strong presence of Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalists led to a distinctly non-secular public sphere: “This dialectic of aggressive missionizing and Hindu resistance contributed to the formation of a public sphere in British India in the nineteenth century that is not at all secular.” Van Der Veer, “Secrecy and Publicity in the South Asian Public Arena,” in \textit{Public Islam and the Common Good}, ed. Salvatore and Eickelman, 33.

\textsuperscript{294} In the following passage, Foucault describes what he means by regimes of truth and how they link knowledge to power: “Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth; that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.” Paul Rabinow, ed., \textit{The Foucault Reader} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 72-73.
The Festival of the Knowledge of God (Mayla-i Khudāshināsī)

The historical details of the Festival of the Knowledge of God (Mayla-i Khudāshināsī)295 have been discussed extensively by others. So here, I will only outline them and highlight a few salient points.296 The Festival was held twice, in the years 1875 and 1876, in the village of Chandapur in the district of Shahjahanpur. On both occasions, it was a three-way debate between Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Nānautvī was present on both occasions, and accounts of the debates focusing on Nānautvī’s presentations and responses were preserved by his students and disciples accompanying him. These have both been published multiple times under the titles Guftagū-yi Madhabī (Religious Discourses) recounting the events of the first year and the more well-known Mubāhitha-i Shāhjahānpūr (The Debates of Shahjahanpur) recounting the events and discourses of the second year. It is on the latter that we will focus, as the second year was thought to be much more successful than the first year and also contains a concise and clear summation of Nānautvī’s theological apologetics.

The origins of the Festival are traced in the Mubāhitha to one Munshī Pyāre Lāl Kabīrpanthī,297 an influential and wealthy inhabitant of Shahjahanpur, who had come under the influence of Samuel Knowles, a British missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Mission, a charismatic and energetic proselytizer and debater who was also a headmaster at a local school. Upon witnessing that he was leaving the ways of his fathers, his friends encouraged him to organize a festival in his gardens by the river, in which scholars of different religions would be invited to discuss and

295 Khudāshināsī can be rendered as knowledge of God or recognition of God and both senses convey the goal of the festival: to come to recognize which understanding of God is the correct one as members of three religious traditions present and contest their knowledge of God. Tareen translates it as “Festival for Deciding the [True] God,” which gives it a more polemical color.
296 See Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India, 221-232; and Tareen, “The Polemic of Shahjahanpur.”
297 It is difficult to ascertain the precise religious affiliations of Pyāre Lāl. Significantly, he is not identified specifically as a Hindu in the Mubāhitha, his moniker Kabīrpanthī might indicate that he came from a lineage of the followers of the panth of Kabir in the sense discussed in the last chapter.
debate the truthfulness and merits of their religious traditions. Pyāre Lāl obtained permission to hold the event from Robert George Gray, the British magistrate of the District, and the event was widely advertised through newspapers, pamphlets, and posters. The Festival was especially significant in that the participants were well-known figures from their respective traditions: representing Hinduism was Swami Dayananda of the Arya Samaj and Munshī Indrāman, a notorious convert from Islam, and representing Islam were Nānautvī and Muḥammad Abū al-Manṣūr, a seasoned debater who had written twenty works on Christianity, including refutations of Pfander, Knowles, and ʿImād al-Dīn, another celebrated convert from Islam. They had a tough opponent in Samuel Knowles representing Christianity. Nānautvī, Abū al-Manṣūr, and others travelled by train from Delhi, arriving at the Festival which was to be held over four days. The Festival had attracted so many people from the neighboring areas that the original tents had to be taken down as people spilled into the surrounding fields to witness the event. After various disagreements and delays, which the Mubāḥitha blames on the Christians trying to control the Festival and its organization, it was agreed by the participants, after a proposal from Pyāre Lāl Urdu, that five questions would be discussed: 1. With what, when, and for what purpose did God create the world? 2. Is the Essence (or Self) of the Creator All-Encompassing and All-Pervading, or not? 3. How is God both Just and Merciful? 4. What are the arguments and proofs for the Vedas, the Bible, and the Qurʾan being God’s Word? 5. What is salvation (or deliverance) and how does one achieve it?

Mubāḥitha is compiled by Nānautvī’s disciple Ḥusayn Ahmad and some of the hagiographic descriptions of Nānautvī offer an interesting insight into the way that the Muslim participants

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perceived the event. The tract describes that Nānautvī and Abū al-Manṣūr decided to go a second year to the Festival only when they saw that important Vedic scholars, presumably indicating Dayananda, were coming, and did not want to pass up the opportunity to challenge them and respond to them. Nānautvī’s speeches are stated to have fanned the flames of faith of the Muslim participants and also opened Pyāre Lāl’s eyes to a different perspective. Additionally, “among the ordinary Hindus, the condition was such that whatever street and lane Mawlavī Sahib [Nānautvī] passed, people would point and say that this is the Muslim scholar (mawlavī) who has shut up the priests and assured the confused; he is not a mawlavī but an avatar (divine incarnation).”\textsuperscript{300} From this it can be seen that the function of such debates was not only a reflection on differing truth claims but also a means of solidifying religious communities and identities vis-à-vis other religious communities and identities, at a time when competitive religion became ascendant in India. Describing the creation of such new public practices for the self-understanding of religious communities, Salvatore and Eickelman state: "Such practices and the resulting social spaces involve both intellectual engagement among participants in overlapping circles of communication, solidarity, and the building of bonds of identity and trust."\textsuperscript{301} Furthermore, it shows how claims through superior religious learning and argument came to challenge not only other religions but also the colonial regime, partially because of the perception of its linkage with Christianity.

\textsuperscript{300} Ibid.,11.
\textsuperscript{301} Salvatore and Eickelman, \textit{Public Islam and the Common Good}, xii.
Nānautvī’s Theological Apologetics at the Festival: On God, Existence, Prophecy, and Humanity

Nānautvī delivered his opening lecture on the first day of the festival. Though he was to give further lectures as well as respond multiple times to his Christian and Hindu interlocutors, this was where he most succinctly presented his foundational perspective and thus, this is the lecture that we will examine below. Therefore, this was Nānautvī’s definitive statement at the Festival. His methodological aim, as is stated a number of times in the written account by his disciple Ḥusayn Aḥmad, was to establish a set of broad questions that all the representatives of all the religious traditions present could agree to. Although he was not successful in fully getting the other participants to agree to his method, the method itself is highly illustrative of the tradition of metaphysics and philosophical theology that Nānautvī was steeped in and its claims to a rational exposition of God, existence, prophecy, humanity, and the relationships between them.

Nānautvī was well-aware that his audience was composed of people of differing religious backgrounds and educational achievement. Just as in Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr, Nānautvī addressed his audience using a theological and philosophical discourse appealing to each person’s intrinsic rationality and the human nature we all share. He rarely quoted the Qur’ān and hadith in support of his arguments since the audience did not all recognize them as authoritative sources. Rather, he appealed to their common humanity and the quest for meaning and knowledge they shared. He thus begins the Ḥujjat by addressing his audience at the Festival: “… All human beings are from the beginning the children of one mother and father. It is, therefore, the responsibility of
everyone to ensure the well-being of each other and it is everyone’s duty to try to direct others to the real purpose and meaning [of life].”302

In the Mubāḥitha, after advising the audience to appreciate the sublimity of the message and not ignore it by looking at the deficient state of the messenger delivering it (meaning himself), Nānautvī began, as he did in many of his treatises, by founding his discussion on the notion of existence or being (wujūd), and particularly on the knowledge of one’s own existence. One of the key innovations in Nānautvī’s presentations of Islamic doctrine is their epistemological and self-reflexive starting-point. In the introduction of his lecture, Nānautvī explicitly states that he is presenting “those beliefs (aqāʾid) and obligations (ahkām) that I consider to be religious beliefs and divine obligations.” In this phrase, note the “I”, a pronoun that did not generally figure in the theological discussions of pre-modern scholars, which were almost always impersonal and in which the subject generally never made an appearance. Here as elsewhere, notably Taqrīr-i Dilpazīr, Nānautvī was prefacing his whole exposition of religious doctrine as an outcome of personal reflection, meditation, and experience, which resulted in conviction and knowledge. It is important to note that for Nānautvī, this personal meditation did not emerge merely from the individuality and the autonomy of the individual mind as it did for Descartes and from whence the whole “epistemological turn”303 in modern philosophy originated. Rather, it emerged from a broader reflection on the nature of the human being and the foundation of our knowledge in the consciousness of our own existence (wujūd). And since existence or being is the primary and universal category which undergirds all particular existents, the knowledge of one’s own

302 Nānautvī, Ḥujjat al-Islām, 20. He further explains what that real purpose (aṣlī maṭlab) is: “Just as the real purpose of the eyes is to see, of the nose is to smell, of the tongue is to talk, of the ear is to listen, the real purpose of every human being is to serve his Creator.”

303 This represents the move from a focus on metaphysics as the primary concern of philosophy to a focus on epistemology as its primary concern, a concern that is common to the whole tradition of post-Cartesian Western philosophy.
existence is ipso facto the knowledge of existence as such. So, though Nānautvī begins with himself, as did Descartes, this does not lead him to give primacy to the human mental faculty like Descartes, who did not have a notion like that of wujūd which provided a continuum between his own consciousness and objects outside of it. Nānautvī is able thus to avoid the mind-body dualism as well as the rationalism that Descartes introduced to Western philosophy despite locating the origins of knowledge in personal experience and reflection.

Nānautvī begins his discussion on what he terms as the foundational reality of human existence, the most basic knowledge that we can have:

That question which is worthy of primary focus and consideration is: who does not have knowledge of his own existence? Prior to everything else, the human being is aware of himself and whatever he knows other than himself, he knows after this knowledge of himself. 304

Here Nānautvī establishes that consciousness of one’s own existence—one’s own self—is the primary form of knowledge from which all other knowledge derives. He further reflects on this self-knowledge and relates it to his metaphysics in Ḥuṣṭat. As we shall see below, Nānautvī’s metaphysics is based on the idea that existence or being, and by extension, all other qualities that exist, are ultimately real firstly in God. The things of the universe thus derive their existence from His Existence and their qualities from His Qualities. Comparing the Divine to the sun, his most preferred analogy, he compares all the things in the universe to sunlight, stating that the true reality of all things in creation is that they are a reflection (partaw) of God. From this, he concludes: “Because the most primary [form of knowledge] is the knowledge of one’s own self (dhāt) and our reality (ḥaqīqat) is a reflection of Him, our recognition and knowledge of

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304 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 18.
ourselves is ultimately dependent on the recognition and knowledge of Him.”305 Here, Nānautvī appears to be saying that even though our knowledge begins in the experience of knowing ourselves, that the self is itself ontologically a reflection of God and knowledge of it reflects the knowledge of God. The commentator on Ḥujjat, Ishtiyāq Ahmad, discusses Nānautvī’s insights here in the light of the oft-quoted saying in Sufism sometimes attributed to the Prophet or to ʿAlī: “He who knows himself, knows His Lord.”306 which directly links self-knowledge with knowledge of the Divine.

In the Mubāḥitha, from the foundational epistemological insight above, Nānautvī further describes the experience of this awareness of one’s own existence:

But the reality of existence is such that is not abiding and subsistent. There was a duration when we were hidden behind the veil of non-existence (ʿadam) and then this duration came when are called existent and a plethora of signs of existence became manifest through us and after this, a duration will come when our existence will once again be separated from us…thus, the duration of existence for human beings is a limited interval between two non-existences.307

Here, Nānautvī demonstrates that our observation of our existence shows that it is ephemeral; there was a time when it was not, and there will once again come a time that it will be not. From this demonstration of the transient and ever-changing nature of existence, Nānautvī argues that our existence is akin to sunlight or moonlight as they appear on earth; or using another example, like the heat in warm water. These do not have the attribute of self-generation but are the endowment of another (ʿatā-i ghayr): in these examples respectively, the sun, the moon, and fire bestow light or warmth to the earth or to water. Thus, the causal chains of sunlight as experienced on earth, or heat as it manifests in water end respectively in the sun and in fire

305 Nānautvī, Ḥujjat al-Islām, 30.
306 Ibid., 30-32.
307 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānāpūr 18.
because light is intrinsic to the sun, and heat to fire, while light is not intrinsic to the earth, nor heat to water. Similarly, our existence is not intrinsic to us. Using this analogy, Nānautvī states that it is therefore necessary that the chain of our existence end in such an Existent (mawjūd) whose existence is intrinsic to it and necessary at every instance and whose existence is self-determined and not endowed through another. This is what we call God (khudā). Nānautvī is here explaining a variant of the renowned Avicennan doctrine of the Necessary Being which had become a normative manner of understanding God in Islamic intellectual traditions and had long been adopted even into mainstream scholastic kalām.

Ibn Sīnā introduced two fundamental distinctions to Islamic ontology: (1) the distinction between the essence or quiddity (māhiyya) of a thing and its existence (wujūd); (2) the necessity, possibility, or impossibility of a thing. The essence of a thing signifies what that thing is in itself (mā hiya: what is it?). Its existence tells us if it actually exists in the external world. Thus, the mind can conceive what a thing is (its essence) but that does not mean that that thing has an existence in the external world. Related to this distinction is the second distinction that divides existence into the impossible (mumtāniʿ), possible (mumkin), and necessary (wājib). The distinction of essence and existence, when subjected to this second distinction, generates three possibilities. Things whose quiddity can be conceived but that could never exist because of metaphysical contradiction are impossible. Things whose quiddity can be conceived and their existence would not entail absurdity are possible things; all the created things of the universe fall in this category for they can equally either exist or not exist. Finally, a thing whose quiddity or essence is inseparable from its existence would be necessary. Such is the Necessary Being, or

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308 Ibid., 19. The same topic is treated in Hujjat al-Islām, 38.
309 The principality of essence or existence was to become a major debate in Islamic philosophy with different philosophers arguing whether existence or essence takes precedence, the former position held by Ibn Sīnā and later Mullā Ṣadrā, and the latter by Suhrawardī.
God, as all other things have existence super-added to their essences and therefore, their existences are accidents, which may or may not have come about. In the Necessary Being, however, essence and existence are one, so it is not possible for it to not exist. All other things as contingent things depend for their existence upon this Necessary Being.\textsuperscript{310} Nānautvī’s argument, as it continues below, is directly built upon these distinctions of Ibn Sinā with God alone having being or existence intrinsically so that the reality of existence belongs to God alone and anything else that has this attribute only derives it as an endowment from God.

Nānautvī transitions from the argument above based on the transient nature of personal identity to reflect on those entities in the world such as the earth, the sky, the seas, air, the sun, moon, and stars, that we do not perceive as ephemeral because no one has ever witnessed their non-existence in the past or the present. If we compare these entities to those that are visibly temporary (nāpā’īdār), we detect that they are marked by two similarities: “the same existence or thing-ness (hastī) that all things seem to be compounded (mushtarik) of”, and “that by which one is differentiated from another and by which we can know the difference of one thing from another thing and recognize it immediately upon seeing it that it is such-and-such a thing.”\textsuperscript{311} The latter, which is the principle of differentiation of one thing from another and which gives us knowledge of what a particular thing is, Nānautvī defines as the reality or essence (ḥaqīqat) of that thing. He continues: that “the existence and the essence of a thing do not have such a relation that one cannot be separated from the other…either externally or in the mind.”\textsuperscript{312} This is contrasted with the idea of separating the number two from a pair, which is not conceptually possible. Such is not the case with the earth or the sky whose non-existence can be conceived

\textsuperscript{310} For a concise summary of Ibn Sinā’s theory of being, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, \textit{Three Muslim Sages}, 24-28.

\textsuperscript{311} Nānautvī, \textit{Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr}, 19

\textsuperscript{312} Ibid. Note that Nānautvī is here referring to the classical philosophical distinction between external existence (\textit{wujūd khārijī}) which is outside of the human subject and mental existence (\textit{wujūd dhīhīnī}) which is inside the mental faculty of the human subject.
mentally. In other words, their essence can be conceived without it being necessary that they exist. In conclusion of this argument, Nānautvī states that the existence of entities like the sun and the moon is other than their reality or essence. Therefore, we cannot say that their existence is self-generated and thus must be endowed through another, and that this is proof of their non-existence before this endowment occurred. Therefore, it is substantiated that their existence had a beginning and their everlastingness (qidāmat) is shown to be a false notion even if no human being has ever seen them being non-existent. Here, Nānautvī is referencing the classical theological problem of the creation vs. eternity of the world which Islamic thought had inherited through Hellenistic philosophy, and which was implicated in one of the chief criticisms of al-Ghazālī against the philosophers. Later Islamic philosophers including those from Muslim India such as Shāh Walī Allāh had discussed this problem in much detail. However, Nānautvī revisits these debates here both to iterate a kind of proof for God from the non-eternal nature of the universe and to challenge new empiricist views of the universe introduced into India by modern science.

Nānautvī continues the above argument that just as no human observed the beginning of these entities, it is possible that they will end even if no human has ever observed this. He concludes this argument with the example used above that as sunlight upon the earth and the heat of warm water are endowed through another, it is possible that light be separated from earth and heat from water. Based upon this, he argues that the other being which endows existence must itself be self-generated and therefore its existence—nor its essence—was ever separate from itself, nor will it ever be in the future. Therefore, It314, the Necessary Being, has existed eternally and will

313 See Hafiz Ghaffar Khan, Shah Wali Allah, 330-36.
314 Although it is unconventional to refer to God as “It”, here and in many other places, Nānautvī refers to God, as is common in philosophy, in an ungendered manner as the primary Existent (mawjūd). For the sake of intelligibility, I have used “He” in some other places where Nānautvī speaks of God in an ungendered way.
Nānautvī continues his metaphysical discussion into existence and its attributes with a further reflection upon the nature of the existence and more specifically, the primary Existent. He begins by addressing another classical subject in Islamic philosophy, unity and multiplicity. He asks:

Now it remains to be seen if such an Existent whose existence is intrinsic to it is one or many; and if it is one, then is it possible or impossible that there be more [like it]? I ask you to consider that just as blackness, whiteness, humanity, animality, etc. are entered into the compass or category (iḥāta) of qualities (awsāf) as particular things of greater or lesser quantity, meaning that there are many black things, many human beings, many animals; the same situation exists in the compass (iḥāta) of existence but the compass of existence is vaster than that of all other qualities. There is no compass above that of existence, for example, as there is above the compass of humanity: that of animality which encompasses humans and non-humans like donkeys, horses, camel, oxen, sheep, goats, etc. There is no such compass above the compass of existence which would encompass existents and non-existents, for if the latter were in it, they would be nothing (ma'dūm), and it is obvious that nothingness is not included in

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316 Nānautvī, Hujjat al-Islām, 19.
317 Compass best translates the technical sense of this term in Islamic philosophy, although the term category could also be used to translate it into Western philosophical idiom. Note, however, that this usage of category would have to be pre-Kantian, in the Aristotelian or Scholastic sense, as Kant’s use of category is innovative and specific to his philosophy. In this usage, I am following that of William Chittick in his The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Cosmology (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). I have also consulted this work as well as Chittick’s earlier, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabī’s Metaphysics of the Imagination (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) for translating key terms from Islamic philosophy and theology.
318 Such agricultural examples are no doubt given to appeal to a section of Nānautvī’s audience at the Festival, who were peasants and workers who lived in the area of Shahjahanpur.
the compass of any quality because it is necessary that every quality be firstly actualized (ḥāṣil) through existence.319

Nānautvī’s central point here is that the category, or to use the technical term, compass (iḥāṭa), of existence (wujūd) is vaster and more encompassing than that of any other category. All “things” (ashyā') are included in the category of existence and that which is not included is precisely not a “thing” and so does not exist.

After establishing this fundamental principle of the all-encompassing nature of existence, Nānautvī, states that existence must therefore be an unbounded or nondelimited (ghayr maḥdūd) quality because for every delimited, it is necessary that it be part of or inhering in a thing which is greater than it. The example he gives in support is that a house, a neighborhood, a town, a district, etc. are limited things but their limitation can only be understood in that they are parts (or technically, cuttings—qaṭʿāt) of land which is vaster than these things. Nānautvī’s conclusion thus follows that existence is not limited by anything since it encompasses all things, but is not encompassed by anything.320 It should be noted that as part of bringing these classical discourses to the public arena, Nānautvī continuously provides examples and analogies from everyday life and the environment of colonial India that his audience, not all of them educated much less used to complex theological debates, could understand and relate to.

Building on this last argument, Nānautvī asks his audience to consider the maxim that there can be no second to God in the compass of existence nor can there be a second to God outside of the compass of existence.321 When our existence, with its deficiency which comes from it being not

319 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 21.
320 The unboundedness of existence is further discussed in Nānautvī, Hujiyat al-Islām, 47-51.
321 In the Hujiyat, Nānautvī has a more detailed exposition of the difference between the unity (wahdat) and unicity (wahdānīyyat) of God, a topic with a rich history of discussion in the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī. He explains their
intrinsic but endowed through another, does not admit the entrance of what is other than it in its compass, how can this not hold true for God, whose existence is intrinsic to Him. To clarify his argument, Nānautvī gives an example from the metaphysics of physical space. He states that just as the space that we as physical bodies occupy cannot be occupied by another at the same time unless we vacate that space or two pounds of grain cannot fit into a container fit to hold one pound, where God abides, another cannot. He continues with an analogy that just as sunlight is a weak and distant degree of the full glory of the light of the sun, our existence as creation consists of weak degrees of the fullness of God’s existence or Being. But even with this deficient existence, we do not allow another to enter our compass of existence. How much more is this the case for God? As for the second part of the maxim stated above, God cannot have a second outside the compass of existence because there is no place or locus of manifestation outside of existence, which is unbounded and contains all things, so there really is no “outside” where another can manifest. Thus, Nānautvī states that it is every intelligent person’s (ʿāqil) responsibility to recognize the Creator of the worlds as having an Essence (dhāt) “one and without a partner” (Qurʾan: 112) and remove the doubts of multiplicity from his heart. Interestingly for our argument, this is the first time that Nānautvī uses a Qurʾanic verse in his speech and even here, the verse is used merely as support for an argument he has already made rather than as a starting point for an argument.

It is at this point that Nānautvī, as a kind of coda to the discussion above, first applies these foundational arguments to the critique of another religious tradition, namely Christianity, represented at the Festival. Nānautvī would come back to criticisms of Christianity throughout his discourses and responses at the Festival, clearly more so than his criticisms of Hinduism. In difference stating that unity is “that there is no composition (tarkīb) in the essence of God”, while unicity, which he is discussing here in the Mubāḥitha, means “that there is no second unto God.” Nānautvī, Ḥujjat, 45.
fact, it seems that Nānautvī, in some ways, as an Indian, sees in Christianity, as an arm of colonialism, a common threat. This tendency is revealed also in the compiler of the Ḫusayn Ahmad’s suggestion that Nānautvī thought it unfortunate that the Hindus were siding with the Christians instead of them, implying that this was to curry favor with the rulers.

He states: “From this discussion, it has also been proven that the conception of the Trinity as elaborated by the interpreters of the doctrines of the Christians of our time is utterly false.” 322 He continues that where real multiplicity (ta addud) exists, real unity (waḥdat-i ḥaqiqī) cannot also remain. This is because oneness and manyness (kathrat) are opposites and the coincidence of opposites is impossible: just as it cannot be that in one object, there is whiteness and blackness, or heat and cold simultaneously; or at one time and place, it be both day and night; or a person simultaneously be learned and ignorant, sick and healthy, or existent and non-existent. In the same manner, it cannot be held that God is both one and three and that unity and multiplicity both exist in Him. Here, as seen in the way that his critique of the Trinity is worded against its contemporary Christian interpreters, it is opportune to remark that just as with his Hindu interlocutors, Nānautvī hesitates to criticize the others’ religious tradition in its essence or original form as such; rather, he critiques the interpretations and perspectives of its contemporary representatives. This is clearly informed by Nānautvī’s inclusivist theology, in line with predecessors like Mirzā Maẓhar Jān-I Jānān and others, which considers all the religions he is debating, whether Abrahamic or Indian, as of divine origin, which have become corrupted or misinterpreted by later scholars and adherents. This idea of corruption is often presented by Muslim theologians as the very reason why new religions are revealed. In a related sense, the idea of textual corruption of scriptures that he often advances particularly towards Christianity is

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322 Nānautvī, Ḫujjat al-Islām, 23.
also rooted in normative notions of Islamic supersessionism. Also significantly, while his conclusions on the contradiction between unity and trinity stand in a long tradition of anti-Trinitarian Muslim polemics, the way he gets to that conclusion by way of the category of existence (wujūd) and its properties comes from a tradition of philosophical theology and ḥikma that developed after the heyday of medieval Muslim-Christian polemics and represents a novel and more metaphysically-oriented critique.

In the next part of his speech at the Festival, Nānautvī continues his discourse with a discussion of God’s independence from everything, and everything’s dependence on God. He states just as the coincidence of the opposites mentioned above is impossible, so is the coincidence of divinity (khudā-ī) and dependence (iḥtiyāj) because divinity is necessarily independent. Just as the sun, as the bestower of light on the earth, cannot be dependent on the earth for its light, God cannot, as bestower of existence of the cosmos, be dependent on it or anything in it. All things, whether a quality (waṣf) or that to which a quality is attributed (mawṣūf), depend for their existence on God. So if one claims that God is dependent on some particular thing, that thing would first have to depend on God. The meaning of dependence is that when one does not possess a particular thing, one is dependent on that which possesses that thing. So if one accepts that everything is dependent on God, whatever is capable of being depended upon in the world is firstly in God. Nānautvī continues with the argument that “whoever is dependent upon another in any form cannot be called God.”

In support, he argues that an aspect of being independent of every thing is that nothing be able to exert any power on the divinity. This is an important point, because Nānautvī uses it to argue against claims of divinity for Jesus, Rama, and other such figures; because, he states, they were dependent on worldly things like imbibing food and drink

323 Ibid., 24.
and subject to worldly things like bodily functions, disease and death. On these bases, Nānautvī stated, claiming divinity for them is an affront to intelligence and justice.

Nānautvī next concludes this portion of his presentation on the nature of existence. He states: “that God of the worlds, just as He is one (yaktā) in his essence and “one with no partners”, is also the synthesis of perfections and qualities (jam ‘-i kamālāt wa ʿifāt) and why should this not be so? Whatever attribute (ṣifat) in the cosmos you see is an imprint in existence (wujūd) of that to which it is attributed (mawṣūf); meaning that before the act of existence, there can be no proof of any attribute or quality.”324 Here Nānautvī, following Mullā Šadrā and those ascribing primacy to existence over essence, is describing how it is only existence (wujūd) that proves that there is any kind of quality or attribute in the universe; for example, ideas that the mind has—like mercy or majesty—can be proven as having reality, only when one finds them in existence. Nānautvī then turns the discussion to the notions of possibility (imkān) and nothingness (ʿadam), affirming that neither of these are attributes, rather the very negation of attributes. In nothingness, existence is negated, and in possibility, the necessity of existence is negated. In reality, nothingness and possibility are like a shadow, which seems like a concrete thing of its own when it is really only the absence of light. Likewise, nothingness and possibility are not real attributes of the universe but appear so due to misapprehension or an imprecise means of expression.325 Nānautvī continues that when all the attributes and qualities are dependent for their actualization and proof upon existence, then it must be said that in reality, all attributes and qualities are really attributes and qualities of existence. Thus, in respect to existence, they are not the bestowal of another but are intrinsic in existence. He states:

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324 Ibid.
325 Ibid.
Wherever there is existence, there will necessarily be all the qualities, in lesser or greater degree; if there will be difference, it will be like that between a mirror and a stone, meaning due to differences in capacity…the mirror is capable of receiving more light as compared to the stone. Thus, it must be so that in all of creation, there is knowledge, perception, and power of sensation and movement in varying degrees.\(^{326}\)

He continues that in human beings, intelligence and perception is greater; in animals, it is found in a lesser degree; in vegetables, even less; and in minerals, even less than that. It cannot be, he said, that even members of the mineral world like the earth, mountains, bricks, and stones, are completely devoid of intelligence, perception, and the power of movement, even though we may not be aware of this. The intelligence of the whole cosmos, even non-sentient beings, is an oft-repeated idea in his more philosophical writings, such as *Taqrīr-i Dilpazūr*, where he speaks of the “World Soul”, which animates the whole cosmos and its inhabitants, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral.\(^{327}\)

This description of the nature of existence was Nānautvī’s preface to his illustration of the theological implications of the relationship of God and creation, or alternatively stated, the attitude that creation in general and human beings in particular should have towards God once they know His nature. Knowledge is central here even if not explicitly addressed as it is generally in Nānautvī’s oeuvre: knowledge of the nature of God and of existence necessarily entails action on the part of the recipient of that knowledge. Nānautvī explicates this by beginning his argument, stating that it is necessary that all perfections are found in God and it is necessary that the whole cosmos and its perfections are dependent on God.\(^{328}\)

\(^{326}\) Ibid, 25.
\(^{327}\) The idea of the “World Soul” was elaborated in its classical form by Ibn Sīnā and the Peripatetics, but also plays an important role in the cosmology of Shāh Wałī Allāh. See Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shah Wali Allah Dihlawī*, 1703-1762 (Leiden: Brill, 1986).
\(^{328}\) See also Nānautvī, *Hujjat al-Islām*, 59-60, for a further discussion of God as the summation (jamʿ) of all perfections and free of all imperfections.
necessary, he concludes, that it is incumbent upon the whole of the cosmos to obey and worship the God of the worlds. 329

Nānautvī further develops the significance of the obedience to God in the Ḥujjat by examining the question of why human beings exist. He begins the work by stating that the real purpose of humanity is to obey and serve God. He illustrates this through an examination of the nature of human beings. He argues that all things in the cosmos seem to serve some purpose, and all of them can be of service to human beings in some way. Human beings would not be able to survive without the earth, water, air, fire, the sun, and the moon; but our non-existence would not affect them at all. The same can be said for animals and plants; we need them for food and medicine but our non-existence would not affect them. So does this mean that human beings are without purpose, asks Nānautvī? There is wisdom in every act of God, so there must be a special purpose for which God has created human beings. This purpose does not lie in serving other creatures but in doing the work of God. But this should not suggest, argues Nānautvī, that God is somehow dependent on human beings, because He is the source of all existence and cannot be dependent on anything. So serving and obeying God ultimately is for human beings’ own benefit, just as obeying a doctor is for the benefit of the patient, not of the doctor. 330

In the next few sections of the Mubāhitha, Nānautvī moves from a consideration of the primary subject of Islamic theology, God, to the second most significant dimension, prophecy and its necessity. In order to do so, he first analyzes the different possibilities of relationship between human beings and God. He presents what he terms the three reasons for obedience in any given situation, applying them then to the obedience and devotion of God: “One serves another for hope of gain as in the case of the servant who serves his master for want of salary or due to the

329 Nānautvī, Mubāhitha-i Shāhjahānpūr 25.
330 Nānautvī, Ḥujjat al-Īslām, 22-29.
fear of loss, as in one following the commands of the ruler or the oppressed obeying the oppressor. Otherwise, one serves another due to love, as in the way lovers are devoted to their beloved.”  

The three possible relationships between a master and subject based on the three reasons for obedience are thus fear, hope, and love. Furthermore, since the ontological root of the hope of gain and fear of loss lies in the attribute of sovereignty (mālikiyyat), Nānautvī deduces that there are only two reasons for obedience: sovereignty and love. The last, Nānautvī states, is ultimately the real cause for obedience; because one can argue that just as love of God can be a reason for obeying Him, love of self is the reason for fear of loss and hope for reward. We can see that this—the argument that love is the reason for obedience—is another example of Nānautvī’s methodology which attempts to present the theological tenets of Islam as natural (ṭabīʿī) to the human condition when it is not impeded by following one’s own desires or erroneous traditions. Nānautvī continues his argument by stating that the qualities mentioned above such as sovereignty, the ability to reward and deprive, as well as belovedness and beauty belongs to existence, and existence firstly belongs to God, all other things deriving their existence from Him. Therefore, all secondary forms of obedience due to other than God is only due to the bestowal of these qualities upon them by God. In Ḥujjat, Nānautvī remarks further on the love of God, illustrating the principle that all the qualities that we experience in life are ultimately qualities of God and therefore, it is our everyday experience that gives us knowledge of God if we are able to perceive it. He states: “…whatever positive quality one sees in anything, it is a reflection of God. So it becomes necessary to accept that all love is actually love of God because whoever the beloved is other than God is only a reflection of Him.”

332 Nānautvī, Ḥujjat al-Īslām, 76-77.

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Nānautvī builds the argument stating that “obedience is to act according to the will and pleasure of another.”\textsuperscript{333} But the problem, he continues, is that the will is hidden (makhfī) and unseen, and no one can know what is our will or pleasure unless we express or indicate it. Since no one has seen God, how can we know what His will is without Him expressing it to us? The kings and the beloved of this world express their will and desires to their subjects and lovers, and get those close to them to not only follow and obey them, but also have them communicate these to others. Nānautvī uses this as an analogy for the necessity of prophecy as a prophet (nabī) or messenger (rasūl, payghambar) is similarly someone close to God who communicates His will and instructions to others, thus establishing the necessity of prophecy.\textsuperscript{334} Since God’s will is not apparent to human beings and needs to be expressed and communicated in order to be recognized, there have to be, by necessity, those to whom God can reveal Himself and who can transmit His will to others.

But in order to be close to someone, Nānautvī continues, one needs to be in conformity with their wishes and temperament (mizāj). Even one serious blemish in a beloved or discord in temperament in someone intimate tarnishes the basis of the relationship. Thus, prophets have to be the image of “total conformity” and cannot go against the will of God in any matter, and this is why they are innocent and preserved from sin (maʿṣūm). They do not possess the capacity of sin: “Since they do not possess any bad quality, it is not possible for bad actions to issue forth from them because willful acts are rooted in natural qualities.”\textsuperscript{335} Here Nānautvī is expounding the intellectual basis for the Islamic doctrine of the prophets’ sinlessness (ʾiṣma) by explaining its logic through the language of everyday relationships.\textsuperscript{336} However, he does explain that there

\textsuperscript{333} Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 27.
\textsuperscript{334} Ibid., 27-28. He further discusses the necessity of prophecy in Ḥujjat al-Islām, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{335} Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 27.
\textsuperscript{336} A further discussion of the sinlessness of prophets can be found in Nānautvī, Ḥujjat al-Islām, 93-94.
is a difference between a sin and a mistake, and while prophets are not susceptible to the former, they can make mistakes without any ill intention or due to forgetfulness.

Using his insight that actions that are rooted in qualities, he continues building his argument on the nature of the prophets which will lead, as we shall see, to the particular qualities and precedence of Muḥammad, a topic dear to Nānautvī and very useful in an arena of competitive religion. He highlights the significance of character (akhlāq), and of the intellect and understanding (ʿaql-o fāhm). He states that good and bad actions are what demonstrates one’s conformity to God and their goodness or evil are directly dependent on character or qualities in which real goodness or evil inheres. Intelligence and understanding is necessary, he adds, for practical wisdom and being able to carry out and judge actions correctly in particular situations. The intelligence is able to properly assess situations and apply the virtues correctly. Nānautvī gives the example that though generosity (sakhāvat) is a great virtue, this does not mean that one should give to prostitutes, alcoholics, or drug addicts in a manner that would increase their negative actions. For the prophets, he continues, “it is necessary to have both a praiseworthy character (akhlāq-i ḥamīda) and a perfected intelligence (ʿaql-i kāmil).” The former produces love for God, because the basis of a good character is precisely love. And when this is combined with the practical wisdom obtained through a perfected intellect, then the proper due and obedience to God would always be maintained. This again, he states, is the basis for the sinlessness of prophets.

Furthermore, he adds, that the foundations of prophethood are precisely excellent character and perfect intelligence, not miracles. Prophethood is not dependent on miracles, which Nānautvī

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337 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 29.
338 In Hujjat, using a slightly different schema, he lists the three qualities necessary for prophecy as love of God, good character, and perfection of understanding and intelligence. See Nānautvī, Hujjat al-Islām, 95-97.
actually pays great attention to in his works, but rather, miracles are dependent on prophethood. They are bestowed upon prophets “so that ordinary people (ʿawāmm) can attain certainty of the prophethood of the prophet.” Nānautvī here is elaborating a distinction often stated in Islamic philosophy between those who have the capacity for knowledge—the elite—and those that need more concrete arguments in order to be convinced—the ordinary people. In this interpretation, while the intelligent are able to understand the importance of prophets based on their knowledge, character, and the profound content of their message, ordinary people need more material proofs such as miracles to fully convince them. This is the very raisan d’etre of miracles. In Hujjat, Nānautvī further distinguishes between two kinds of miracles: intellectual miracles (muʿjizāt al-ʿilmiyya), of which the Qurʾan is the greatest example, and practical miracles (muʿjizāt al-ʿamaliyya). The former are superior to the latter because knowledge is superior to action and practice. This is why no matter how much worship and religious exercises a Muslim performs, he cannot equal the state of a prophet because the latter’s priority is founded upon his knowledge, not merely his acts. Nānautvī is here building a case for the superiority of Muḥammad, as we shall see below, over other prophets due to his most remarkable miracles being intellectual, though Nānautvī spends even more time showing how his practical miracles unquestionably demonstrate his superiority as well.

From here, Nānautvī, for a good portion of the rest of his speech, enters a more polemical mode suited to a competitive religious arena in which demonstrating the superiority of the founder of one’s religion vis-à-vis others was a central concern. However, this was, for Nānautvī, not just a polemical move but an apologetic one, because the prophet Muḥammad was often an object of

339 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 30.
340 In Hujjat, Nānautvī discusses the miraculous nature of the Qurʾan in a discourse about the miracles of Muḥammad; Nānautvī, Hujjat al-islam, 104-105.
341 Ibid., 101.
critique by those polemicizing against Islam, such as Christian missionaries and Arya Samajis. Focusing on the Prophet can be further seen as a significant dimension in late Sunni traditionalism and in the revival movements in India, as across the Muslim world, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A successful argument for the greatness of Muḥammad could thus serve the dual purpose of a rhetorical coup against those basing their critiques of Islam on Muḥammad and uniting the Muslim community behind the figure of Muḥammad against other religious communities who were seen as challengers in a competitive religious space.

Nānautvī builds his argument on the points he just discussed, that an excellent character and superior intelligence defines the best of human beings, who are the prophets, and it in fact preserves them from going against the will of God in any matter. This complete conformity to the will of God, *islām* in its most universal sense, returns humanity to its original primordial nature. Most human beings do not conform themselves to the will of God and the destiny of human beings, as opposed to the rest of creation, is precisely to willingly choose to obey God. Nānautvī’s claim is that it is through character and intelligence that this is achieved and the perfect exemplars of fulfilling this destiny and obtaining complete conformity to God are the prophets. His argues that if there is any one individual and prophet who best exemplifies this, it is Muḥammad. He states: “When one looks at intelligence and virtue, [then one sees that] his presence, Muḥammad the Messenger of God—may the blessings and peace of God be upon him—is the greatest of all.”342 Nānautvī’s primary proof for the intelligence of the Prophet is that he was unlettered (*ummī*) and “where he was born and raised and lived his life was devoid of knowledge of any of the sciences, neither sacred sciences were known nor worldly sciences were

to be found, neither were there any heavenly books nor any earthly books; due to ignorance, there were numerous ills [in the culture].” After such an upbringing and life in such a deprived society, he brought:

…such a religion (dīn) and law and unparalleled book and such guidance and clear proofs to such a world that the erstwhile ignorant Arabs became, in the science of metaphysics (ilāhiyyāt) which is the science of the Essence and Attributes of God and is the most difficult of all subjects, in the sciences of worship (‘ibādāt), ethics (akhlāq), politics (siyāsīyyāt), economic transactions (muʿāmilāt), livelihood (maʿāsh), and eschatology (maʿād), the envy of Aristotle and Plato; whereby, Arab civilization became the envy in its cultural refinement of the philosophers and wise men of the world.

He continues that the origins of all this knowledge and all these sciences, which are unparalleled by any other nation or civilization, lies in the real teacher of all those Muslims who developed and studies these sciences and that is none other than Muḥammad. Nānautvī here, as elsewhere in his debates and writings, stresses the amount of knowledge that Muslims have amassed and the numerous sciences they have studied and developed, claiming that no other group of people comes even close. This, of course, is tied to his central philosophy, as we saw in Ch. 2, that the intellect is the primary and most important faculty of humanity and its emphasis in the Islamic revelation is a de facto proof of the veracity of that revelation and the prophet who brought it. More significantly, unlike reformists of various stripes who seek to rid Islam of what they see as foreign influences and later innovations and return to the Qur’an and hadith, Nānautvī sees the whole of Islamic civilization with all the various forms of knowledge, including the sciences he mentions above that were of obvious Hellenistic influence, that developed within it, as ultimately linked to and flowing from Divine revelation and the knowledge of the Prophet. In Hujjat, he

343 Ibid.
344 Ibid., 31.
comments further on how the intelligence, vitality, and ethics of a religious community (*ummat*) are derived from its prophet. He illustrates this through comparing God, the Prophet, and his community to the sun, the moon, and the earth. Just as the moon derives its light from the sun and reflects it to the earth, the prophets represent the intellect that reflects the light of understanding to the community. Similarly, the vitality (*ḥayāt*) of the community and its ethics are also founded on the vitality and the ethics of its prophet.345

Returning to his speech in the *Mubāḥitha*, regarding the virtue of Muḥammad, Nānautvī gives another impassioned interpretation:

> As for the state of his virtue, he was not the king of any kingdom, a prince, an aristocrat; neither a great merchant nor an agriculturalist, and neither a landowner nor an inheritor of great property, and nor did he earn much wealth himself; in such poverty, he united the impetuous, the rebellious, the hardened of the Arab nation as brothers and impressed them to such a degree that where a drop of his sweat would fall, they were willing to spill their blood.346

He adds that this was not a passing state for his followers but they maintained this for a lifetime, leaving their homes, their businesses, their families, and their wealth out of love for him. They even fought and killed and were killed at his behest. Nānautvī argues that this kind of devotion from anyone, much less a group of unruly people like the Arabs of the time, was the clearest sign of the immensity of character that Muḥammad possessed. He asks if any other prophet such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, or Jesus elicited such a response. This serves the rhetorical purpose of making the point that the kind of influence that Muḥammad, due to his character and intelligence, had on his immediate companions as well as all of Islamic civilization is the greatest

345 Nānautvī, *Ḥujjat al-Islām*, 97-98.
proof of his prophecy for those with intellect for if Moses or Jesus could be called prophets while achieving far less, why would that be denied to Muḥammad.\textsuperscript{347}

From this, Nānautvī moves to argue the classical Islamic theological position that Muḥammad is the greatest of the prophets\textsuperscript{348} and is also their seal. But the way he arrives at that conclusion is rooted in philosophical Sufism rather than kalām. He explains that all that exists in the world, whether this be of the perfections of the prophets or those of the saints (\textit{awliya’}), all is bestowed by God, as he has argued above. Additionally, the world, and more specifically human beings, manifest many different perfections and traits. Some have beauty, others grace and elegance, or power and strength, and yet others intelligence and discernment. Nānautvī here gives an analogy comparing the relation between God, in whom all these qualities exist, and human beings, who manifest one or more of these qualities, and that between a teacher, who possesses all the sciences, and the students, who come to him and learn from one another. Their proficiency in one or other of these sciences will demonstrate what teaching of the master they are transmitting.

From these observations, Nānautvī makes the argument that each prophet manifests and exemplifies a particular quality of God. In this he is following Ibn al-ʿArabī in the \textit{Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam} (Ringstones of Wisdom), where each chapter is devoted to a particular prophet, each of whom is endowed with a particular Divine quality.\textsuperscript{349} The doctrine of the perfect or complete human being (\textit{insān al-kāmil}) developed in the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī was based on the notion that the prophet or saint is the synthesis of all the qualities of God; nevertheless one or other quality of God can dominate or be emphasized in each perfect human being and this is the reason for the difference between them. Following this perspective, Nānautvī argues that each prophet

\textsuperscript{347} He is responding here to Christian missionaries who questioned how Muhammad could be a prophet.

\textsuperscript{348} Compare \textit{Hujjat}, 99.

manifests a specific Divine quality and one method to determine what quality is manifest in him is to observe the kind of miracles he performs. For they, as acts of God, flow directly from that Divine quality. Thus, from Jesus’ raising the dead and healing the sick, one can see that he manifests the quality of granting life or salvation (jān bakhshī) and from Moses’ turning the sticks into serpents, the quality of transformation (tabdīl, taqlīb) can be witnessed.

So what is the quality that exemplifies Muḥammad according to Nānautvī? He states that Muḥammad is dominated by the quality of knowledge (ʿilm) and the incomparability (ʿījāz) of the Qur’an and his perfection of knowledge demonstrates this. He adds that knowledge is that quality upon which all the other qualities depend but it itself does not depend upon anything other than itself. Such faculties as power, will, and others are useless without the quality of knowledge that can guide them. He illustrates this through the most ordinary of acts such as eating bread or drinking water, for even in these the desire to eat or drink needs to be informed by the knowledge of what can be eaten and drunk and what cannot be. Based on this, he argues that knowledge is the highest of all qualities and all others qualities are subordinate to it. By analogy, states Nānautvī, since the prophet Muḥammad exemplifies the quality of knowledge, he is thus superior to every other prophet.350 Furthermore, just as all perfections end in the perfection of knowledge, Muḥammad is necessarily the seal of all the prophetic perfections and the seal of the prophets.

Nānautvī’s metaphysical understanding of the finality of Muḥammad’s prophethood proved to be lost on many of his contemporaries and came to be his most controversial opinion. His main treatise on the subject, Tahdīr an-Nās351, has been criticized and refuted numerous times from

350 An aspect that he briefly discusses in Ḥujjat is that Muhammad’s ability to prophesizing the future and their proven veracity is another reason for Muḥammad’s superiority.
351 Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī, Tahdīr an-nās (Deoband, n.d.)
its publication to the contemporary period, particularly by 'ulama' from the Barelvi school. The founder of that school, Aḥmad Razā Khān had actually declared a fatwa of disbelief (kufr) on Nānautvī for his views on the finality of prophethood. Taḥdhīr an-nās is a short treatise written in response to a query made to Nānautvī about the hadith narrated by Ibn 'Abbās commenting on the idea of the seven heavens and seven earths mentioned in Qur'an 65:12: “God created seven earths and for each earth (ard), an Adam like your Adam, a Noah like your Noah, an Abraham like your Abraham, a Jesus like your Jesus, and a prophet like your Prophet.” The questioner wanted to know how to harmonize the doctrine of the finality of Muḥammad’s prophethood with this hadith, which seems to challenge it if there are prophets like Muḥammad in other worlds or “earths”. In Nānautvī’s detailed response, he argued that the understanding of the doctrine of the finality of prophethood that ordinary people had was deficient because there is no great intrinsic virtue to being the last in a line. While Muḥammad is the last prophet, this chronological prophethood is not the highest meaning of the idea of finality (khatam) of prophethood. Nānautvī turns to the school of Ibn al-ʿArabī to posit that in addition to chronological sealship (khātamiyya zamāniyya), there is also essential sealship (khātamiyya dhātiyya). This signifies that, in keeping with the Akbarian doctrine of the Muḥammadan Reality (ḥaqīqa al-Muḥamadiyya), which was created before all else and which is the summary of all attributes that God manifests in the world, the essence of prophecy is to be found in the reality of Muḥammad. Therefore, all other prophets derive their prophecy from the essence of Muḥammad. Muḥammad’s prophecy is essential and their’s accidental. He is thus the seal not only in time but in essence. In a climate of intense intra-religious competition between Muslims of different orientations, this view was characterized by Nānautvī’s opponents as questioning the finality of prophethood. The appearance of Mīrzā

352 Quoted in Taḥdhīr al-nās, 2. There does not seem to be an agreement among hadith scholars about its authenticity, some deeming it authentic, others weak, and others inauthentic.
Ghulām Aḥmad, who claimed for himself a kind of prophethood, being a shadow prophet (*zilli nabi*) using similar arguments to question the literal meaning of the finality of prophethood, added more fuel to the fire.\(^{353}\)

At the Festival, Nānautvī uses a simplified version of this argument. He states that the seal of the prophets, due to his possession of the highest level (*martaba*) of prophethood, is above the laws of all the other prophets, just as a king or governor is above the laws stipulated by those on lower levels of government. Therefore, he is able to abrogate the laws of others. The law stipulated by the highest authority is both essentially, the final word, and is also chronologically, that which must be obeyed immediately. This is why, Nānautvī claims that no other prophet claimed finality. If there was anyone who could have claimed it, he continues, it would be Jesus. But he didn’t, citing the oft-repeated Muslim apologetic claim that the Paraclete that Jesus claimed would come actually refers to Muḥammad.\(^{354}\)

The final section of the speech concerns a topic often discussed by Nānautvī, that the miracles of Muḥammad were greater than those of other prophets and decisively prove his superiority. This was a novel strategy used by Nānautvī that seems most strongly aimed at Christians who would use the miracles of Jesus to prove his divinity and would criticize Islam by claiming that Muḥammad did not perform miracles and was, therefore not a prophet of God but a fraud. Dayananda, in his *Satyarsh Prakāsh*, followed by other Hindus, had also adopted versions of these arguments concerning Muḥammad. And Nānautvī’s arguments are also directed at him,

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\(^{353}\) Aḥmadī apologists have interestingly used the works of Nānautvī as support for their claim that Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad was a kind of prophet.

demonstrated by a lengthy exposition of the issue in *Qibla-numā*.  Using copious examples from the *sīra* and hadith literature, Nānautvī not only refuted the claim of Muḥammad not performing miracles, but also refuted the divinity and superiority of Jesus using the Christian missionaries’ own reasoning. Furthermore, his emphasis on miracles stands in stark contrast to some other prominent Muslim voices entering the public sphere, the most marked contrast being with Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, who attempted to give an empiricist and rationalist interpretation to the Islamic revelation, denying the possibility of miracles and interpreting them figuratively. It is of interest that the rational and the empirical were so significant for Nānautvī. But by relying on the Islamic philosophical tradition instead of Victorian empiricism, like Khān, he was able to access a wider intellectual framework in which reason, nature, and revelation could be harmonized. While Khān was attempting to make a place for Muslims in the new colonial order of British India where they would embrace modernity and cooperate with the British, Nānautvī can be seen as attempting to build alternative discourses and structures to colonial modernity without fomenting direct opposition to British rule, at least at this late period in his life. A forceful public presentation of miracles through intellectual arguments can be seen as an example of such an attitude and a tacit critique of his co-religionists who would sacrifice the verities of their religion for worldly peace.

The miracles he especially concentrates on and which demonstrate a greater level of miraculousness than those of other prophets in his exposition are the tree stump in the mosque at Medina that cried when the Prophet started to use a different place to deliver his sermons, the streams of water that flowed from his fingertips, and the splitting of the moon. At the Festival, he

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355 His most detailed treatments of analyzing the miracles of Muḥammad and comparing them to that of other prophets can be found in *Qibla-numā*, 68-97, and *Hujjat*, 108-141, which also makes other comparisons between Muḥammad and the other prophets in favor of the former.
gave most attention to the first, arguing, for example, that while Jesus’ resurrection of the dead gave life once again to a man who formerly possessed it, Muḥammad, by the very touch of his body, brought to life an inanimate thing that possessed no spirit of life and gave it the ability to love. Nānautvī, using the Sufi epistemology of different levels of certainty, argued that real love is a product of the highest level of certainty (ḥaqq al-yaqīn) and therefore, Muḥammad was able to bring the tree stump to a level that it can take years of discipleship and spiritual training for a human being to achieve. Thus, he asks, how is this not far greater than just bringing a body back to life?³⁵⁶

Nānautvī’s speech on the first day of the Festival concluded with a discussion of the diversity of religions and why Islam is the only religion that should be followed today. Although he is building here on the arguments developed in the rest of the speech, this also marks one of Nānautvī’s most concise descriptions of his view of other religions and towards the question of religious diversity in general. He begins this discussion by stating that his claim is not that other religions are man-made or fraudulent in their claims of divine origins. In fact, he states, that Muslims recognize two religions to be definitively of divine origin, Judaism and Christianity. But unfortunately, both have been corrupted or altered by the opinions of men. As for the Hindu religion, he continues, we cannot say that it is definitely of divine origin, but we also cannot say with any certainty that it is not. This is because the Qur’an states: “There is no nation to whom We have not sent a Warner.”³⁵⁷ Since, Nānautvī states, prophets were sent to every nation as this verse proclaims, we cannot say that no guiding prophet reached this ancient and geographically large land of the Hindus, and “it would be no wonder that those that Hindus called avatars were

³⁵⁷ Qur’an, 35:24.
actually the prophets or saints, who are representatives of a prophet, of their time.” He then cites another verse of the Qur’an, that of the prophets sent before, “some of them We have mentioned to you and some of them We have not mentioned to you,” explaining that the prophets sent to India could very well be those not mentioned in the Qur’an.

He continues with the counter-argument that he knows some Muslims would make- that if the avatars of the Hindus were prophets or saints, why would they claim divinity and engage in morally illicit actions such as fornication and thievery. One can respond to this, he states, that this could be analogous to Christians claiming the divinity of Jesus and to the Biblical accusations of intoxication and fornication against Lot and Noah. Similarly, Hindus could have attributed this statements and actions to Krishna and Rāma in the way that Christians have done to Jesus despite clear words in which he constantly refers to his humanity and performs human actions in the Gospels. Here, as in his written works, it is clear that Nānautvī is inclined as much as possible to give validity to the divine origins of Hinduism and respect to its central figures, exemplifying a specific trend among Indian Muslims of integrating Hindu doctrines and figures into an Islamic conceptual framework.

He concludes that his claim is not that the other religions are false or not heavenly in origin, but that in the present day, the only way to salvation (najāt) is to follow the Prophet Muḥammad and his religion. This is, of course, the traditional supersessionist position which argues that Islam

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358 Nānautvī, Mubāḥitha-i Shāhjahānpūr, 41.
359 Qur’an, 40:78.
360 He is undoubtedly referring here to the celebrated stories of Krishna and his sexual encounters with the gopis and to the instance when he stole butter as a child.
361 It is notable that the text indicates that Nānautvī refers to Krishna Rāma by the honorifics used by Hindus “Sri Krishan Jī” and “Sri Rāmchandar Jī.”
362 This indicates that Nānautvī was familiar not only with some Hindu texts but also with translations of the Bible into Urdu or perhaps Persian.
supersedes all other religions once Muḥammad has been sent as a final prophet. There are
different perspectives, however, among different Muslim scholars as to who is saved and who is
not. Nānautvī, unfortunately, does not explain his views beyond a general statement that
salvation is only obtainable in this day through Islam. It is possible, however, that this position
was modified by concessions made for those who did not encounter Islam or did not encounter in
an intellectually satisfactory way, as this had become a consensus position for later Ashʿarī
theologians.\textsuperscript{364} It is also possible, that as a Māturīdī, Nānautvī was stricter in his approach as the
Māturīdīs, unlike the Ash ʿarīs who absolved all those that Islam had not reached, argued that due
to having an intellect, all human beings are able to know that God exists and judge between good
and evil and thus, they were accountable.\textsuperscript{365} Returning to his speech, he explains that the other
religions have been abrogated (mansūkh) and how this is not God making a mistake or changing.
Rather, it is analogous to a different medicine given for a different situation. So that Judaism and
Christianity were the most appropriate religions for their times but the durations of their times
had run out and now only Islam was acceptable. Interestingly, referring to the British viceroys of
India of the day, he makes a further analogy stating that while it was right to follow Lord
Northbrook\textsuperscript{366} in his time, no one would dispute that one must follow the current Governor Lord
Lytton today and this logic also applies to the prophets, whose laws, which insure salvation and
protect from punishment, are stipulated for a time.

\textsuperscript{364} For a wide-ranging discussion on salvation and the fate of others in the Islamic tradition, see Muhammad Hasan
Khalil, \textit{Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and

\textsuperscript{365} The classical Ashʿarī approach was based on the voluntaristic idea that revelation is the only way to know God
and even more so, to have a criteria of right and wrong since this was not inherently known to human beings. The
Māturīdīs emphasized that human beings, due to their intelligence, could know good and evil and it was not
dependent purely on knowing God’s stated will through revelation.

\textsuperscript{366} He was viceroy of India from 1872-1876, with Lytton taking over 1876-1880.
At this point, the recorder of the speech, Ḫusayn Aḥmad attests, Nānautvī’s speech was interrupted by the Christian organizers as his allocated time was up. The speech was followed by a Christian convert and minister Muḥyī al-Dīn raising a number of objections to Nānautvī’s speech, all of which were about relatively minor issues and not the central claims Nānautvī made, and Nānautvī then responded in detail to him. After Nānautvī’s speech on the first day, the Christians and Hindus gave presentations on the second day, followed by objections from Nānautvī and others and a chance to respond and counter-respond. The third day shorter final speeches were given, again to be debated by all three parties.

Nānautvī had complained that the structure of the Festival did not allow enough time to make an adequate presentation. Since he was unable to discourse on all the points that he wanted, Ḫujjat can give an indication of some of the topics he may have discussed as the rest of his speech can be seen as a succinct summary of the first part of Ḫujjat, although they are organized differently. While he was able to cover the foundational principles of his theological apologetics with his discussions on God, existence, prophecy, the cosmos, and humanity, he was unable to discuss the religious practices of Muslims and justify them before non-Muslims who had criticized them and also to explain their rational and spiritual meanings to Muslims. Significant discussions in the Ḫujjat include a discussion of the meaning of the acts of worship such as the canonical prayer (namāz) and its different movements (prostrating, bowing, the position of the hands, orienting to the Ka’ba), the alms-tax (zakāt), fasting (sawm), and the pilgrimage to Mecca and its rites. The largest section of Ḫujjat devoted to Islamic practices is the one related to animal sacrifice (qurbānī). The eating of meat had become an increasing cause of friction between emergent

367 The text alludes a number of times to Nānautvī’s dissatisfaction with the Knowles and the Christian organizers of the Festival and what to him seem to be arbitrary and unhelpful ways of organizing the debates, including giving too little time for plenary presentations.
368 Nānautvī, Ḫujjat al-Islām, 83-92. Nānautvī’s explanations here, rather brief, are the direct precursor to the more intensive work of Ashraf ʿAlī Thānvī and his expositions of the inner and rational meanings of the shariʿa.
Hindu and Muslim communities in nineteenth-century India. Hindu reformers like Dayananda had severely criticized it and it is likely partially in response to such objections that Nānautvī provides a lengthy rejoinder explaining the intellectual and natural bases of all dimensions of animal sacrifice and the consumption of animals. Among the topics discussed here include: why sacrificing animals is not cruelty; it is natural for human beings to eat meat; why blood is forbidden; reasons for method of slaughter and the invoking of God’s name; each animal’s natural love for God. Nānautvī’s extensive treatment of this little-discussed subject is, along with his exposition of the Ka’ba and qibla discussed in the last chapter, is one of his most original contributions. These two examples also allow us to witness the direct interventions that Muslim scholars and spokesmen increasingly needed to perform in a public sphere that was not only competitive but able to generate serious conflict between communities, which the unfortunate history of communalism in India demonstrates.

**Concluding Remarks**

This chapter presented a close study of Nānautvī’s participation in one of the first organized public interreligious debates involving Muslims, Hindus, and Christians at the Festival of the Knowledge of God at Shahjahanpur. The very convening of such a festival demonstrates the changing dynamics of religious communities in colonial India. From often self-enclosed communities in the pre-modern era where religious discourse was conducted within well-defined boundaries maintained by traditional elites, the religious communities of India had become increasingly self-aware and competitive religions trying to find their place in a changing cultural landscape threatened by foreign power and cultural imports and the loss of traditional authorities. Although these communities had to emerge from this intellectually self-enclosed paradigm in the
modern era, paradoxically, the modern formation of religious identities often resulted in less flexible and more reified interpretations of religion. An important part of this was the competition with other religions in which Protestant Christian missionaries played a major role by generating a framework where different religious traditions became different systems of belief and practice with different truth claims which were all naturally opposed to each other. The rise of the public sphere only intensified these tendencies and brought them to larger amounts of people.

Different Muslim scholars and intellectuals responded in different ways to this challenge of making space for Islam and Muslims in a religiously diverse and competitive milieu, where they were further challenged by colonial rule and the transformations brought by modernity. Although participation in the public sphere, through publications and new forms of education for Muslims, became normative for most Muslim scholars and intellectuals, relatively few took up the task in the nineteenth century of going outside the community and facing the challenge of alternative religious and philosophical perspectives. Nānautvī stands as the foremost example among the ‘ulama’ of his time in adopting this route of defending and expounding Islam in the religious public sphere.

Nānautvī’s presentations examined above are a simplified and reworked version of complex Islamic theological and philosophical discourses to appeal to a broad audience. They are, however, also grounded in Nānautvī’s own epistemological ontology which posits human experience as the starting point of knowledge. With this starting point, he could claim to his intellectual opponents and interlocutors that his method, just as that of the increasingly popular and authoritative proponents of modern empiricism and science, is also based in the primacy of observation through personal experience followed by subsequent rational reflection upon it in
order to arrive at publically verifiable conclusions. In this, his apologetic theology is an original example of how pre-modern intellectual traditions could be utilized to respond to the challenges of modern thought and the conditions of modernity.
Conclusion

In this study, I have introduced the intellectual project and thought of Muḥammad Qāsim Nānautvī as a significant chapter of modern Islamic intellectual history, particularly in South Asia. Despite being well-known for his central contribution to the founding of the most successful modern Islamic seminary in South Asia, Deoband, the other aspects of his work, specifically his philosophical theology tailored for the modern public sphere and his sometimes groundbreaking interreligious polemics with Hindus and Christians, have remained relatively little-known. It is this lacunae that this study has aimed to fulfill. I have examined his intellectual background, his life and activities, and some of his most important works—specifically those dealing with theology, philosophy, and interreligious polemics and apologetics. While these may introduce an important and influential intellectual figure that was hitherto not well-studied, does his work allow us to draw broader conclusions about the continuity and transformations of Islamic traditions in the modern world?

My answer would be definitely in the affirmative. The reason for this is that a man like Nānautvī stood at a crossroads—an era when traditional modes of religiosity were being rapidly transformed and reconfigured in the light of modern developments, such as the rise of the public sphere, the coming of colonial modernity with its new institutions and intellectual paradigms associated with modern science, rationalism, and empiricism, and the growth of new modes of religious interpretation and identity due to the decline of traditional authorities. As such, Nānautvī was involved, along with many other Muslims of differing persuasions, in participating in and helping to create a paradigm shift, an intellectual reconfiguration of Islamic traditions that we have only begun to fully appreciate. Pre-modern Islamic traditions, even though they outwardly retained the language of continuity, had also become something else through the
process of translating them in accordance with the conditions of modernity. An example of this is the very term Islam/islām itself, which transformed from signifying conformity to the Divine to representing a species of the genus “religion” among other such species, like Hinduism or Christianity. Being at this crossroads, the life and work of Nānautvī allows us a lens into appreciating a number of significant developments in regards to Islamic traditions in the modern period, especially in South Asia, but also having a wider application. I will mention here three principal conclusions, as revealed in the main body of the dissertation that give us a lens into these new developments.

The first is the renewed significance of the role of the ʿulamaʾ in modern Islamic societies and more specifically, in South Asia, as opposed to the conventional view that represented them as artifacts of the past. Nānautvī’s career shows how the ‘ulama’ became spokesmen for Islam and defenders of Islamic traditions and communities in a time of crisis and change. They were able to do this because they inherited the mantle of authority from other traditional Muslim elites whose power had declined with the rise of modernism. Their authority was a moral one and allowed them to negotiate and determine the contours of Islamic communities in new ways in which religiosity played an important role and also, as in the case of Nānautvī, defend and define Islamic doctrines and practices in an increasingly pluralistic and intellectually and religiously competitive world.

The second development witnessed through Nānautvī is the “translation” of classical Islamic traditions into the modern public sphere. In the case of Nānautvī, this meant the utilization of the traditions of philosophical theology and ḥikma in order to find a language of rationality that can be used in conversation and debate with those of other religions as well as modern secularism. Such a language enabled Nānautvī to articulate a rational theology for the public sphere in which
Islam could be defended and presented not through scriptural arguments not shared by non-Muslims or those of rationalist and empiricist bent but through the claim that it is the most rational and natural religion according to the intellect and primordial nature found in every human being. The rise of the public sphere compelled Muslim scholars to develop discourses that would be understandable not only to other scholars, as was the wont for much Islamic discourse in the past, but also to a newly mobile and modern educated public. Nanautvi’s work constituted an important step in constructing new ways of speaking about pre-modern Islamic intellectual and theological traditions that form the background to understanding Islam in South Asia today.

Thirdly, in Nanautvi’s life and work, we see the beginnings of a new understanding of religion that developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and then exported to colonized lands like British India. This understanding, developed through European colonialism, Orientalism, and Christian missionary discourse, converts religion into a reified and abstract entity set off from other such entities, instead of viewing them as concrete and living traditions. Such a development is very visible in India where religious traditions go from having flexible boundaries in conversation and sometimes overlap with each other in the pre-modern period to rigid oppositional identities in the modern period. It is only this movement that makes possible a public polemic encounter between Hindu and Muslim scholars, the first of its kind in South Asia, in which the participants were Nanautvi and Dayananda.

Taken together, the developments that Nanautvi’s life and work offers us a lens into, reveal not merely that Nanautvi was an important figure in the annals of modern Muslim thought and Islamic revivalism, but also the deeper structure of the kind of changes that were affecting Islamic cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These changes were not only due to the
introduction of new ideas, as has often been discussed in intellectual histories of the modern Islamic world, but due to structural transformations such as the rise of the public sphere and all that entailed, the reconfiguration of authority, and new ways of conceiving and articulating religion and religious language.
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