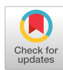

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FORUM ARTICLE

The theological foundations of Muslim modernism and traditionalism in South Asia

SherAli Tareen

Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, United States of America
Email: stareen@fandm.edu

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Abstract

This article examines the theological and hermeneutical foundations and fault lines of Muslim modernism and traditionalism in South Asia. It does so through a close reading of a massively consequential but thus far unstudied debate on the normative sources and interpretive parameters of religion in colonial modernity between the scholars Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi (d. 1877), founders of arguably the most prominent bastions of modernism and traditionalism in Muslim South Asia: the Aligarh Muslim University and the Deoband Madrasa, both established in the late nineteenth century.

Keywords: Traditionalism; modernism; Aligarh; Deoband; hermeneutics; knowledge; authority

Introduction

This article[1] details and explicates the theological and hermeneutical foundations of arguably the two most influential rationalities of Islam in modern South Asia, represented by the institutions and movements of Aligarh Muslim University and the Deoband Madrasa. More specifically, this article centres on a subtle yet substantive disagreement between the pioneers of these schools: Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi (d. 1877), one of the founders of the Deoband Madrasa. I take up this task through a close reading of a dense but immensely profitable exchange of letters between Khan and Nanautvi in 1874 that engaged with some major questions of theology, hermeneutics, and the boundaries of Islam as a normative religious tradition. This exchange was later published as an Urdu text called *Clarifying Faith* (*Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*) by Nanautvi's followers; it is a short epistle roughly 40 pages long, though its brevity belies its layered complexity.[2]

[1]Some of the discussion in this article also appears briefly in my book: SherAli Tareen, *Perilous intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim friendship after empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), pp. 222–231. This article though presents a much more expanded and comprehensive account of that discussion.

[2]Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid in Maqalat-i Hujjat al-Islam. Vol. 2* (Multan: Idara-yi Ta'lifat-i Ashrafiya, 2018).

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Few modern South Asian Muslim scholars have been written about as extensively in the Western academy as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, with multiple monographs and edited volumes devoted to his thought and politics, and to the history of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College that he founded in 1875, which later came to be known as Aligarh Muslim University.[3] However, one aspect of his thought that deserves more sustained and focused attention is his nuanced yet serious differences with the traditionalist ʻulama of his time. Complicating this task is the fact that Khan was by no means detached or separated from the discursive universe of the ʻulama or what in the Western academy is categorized as Muslim traditionalism, meaning a tradition of Islamic scholarship grounded in normative fidelity with the resources and interpretive protocols of at least one of the legal canons and schools of theology that developed in early Islam.[4] Khan is popularly perceived and invariably categorized as a 'modernist' who sought to harmonize Islam with the challenges and opportunities of Western modernity thrust on South Asian Muslims through British colonialism. A modernist he certainly was—but a far more complicated one than a monochromatic modernist who could be readily set in contradistinction to the traditionalism of the ʻulama. As scholar of religion Khurram Hussain has argued in a recent study on Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Khan's thought and intellectual career pursued a form of double critique that diagnosed and sought to redress what he saw as dissatisfactions with both colonial modernity and Muslim traditionalism.[5] Moreover, he was intimately connected to and familiar with the knowledge traditions and intellectual milieu of South Asian ʻulama and Sufi masters.

For instance, to give perhaps the most striking example of intersecting scholarly genealogies between Khan and the traditionalist ʻulama in the context of this article, he and Qasim Nanautvi in fact shared the famous teacher of Arabic at the prestigious Delhi College, Mamluk ʻAli (d. 1851). In his early life, Khan and his family were closely associated with Shah Ghulam Ali Dihlavi (d. 1824), one of the chief disciples of the prominent eighteenth-century Naqshbandi Sufi master in Delhi, Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan (d. 1781). Similarly, in terms of intellectual convergences, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's critique of popular customs and everyday life among the masses had visible commonalities with the critique of customs (*rusum*) launched by the pioneers of Deoband and their reformist predecessors, such as the celebrated eighteenth-century polymath Shah Wali Ullah's (d. 1762) curious and controversial grandson Shah Muhammad Ismaʿil (d. 1831).[6] Khan held Ismaʿil in great reverence and his major text, *The Path of Normativity in Repelling Heretical Innovation* (*Rah-i Sunnat dar Radd-i Bidʿat*) published in

[3]See, for instance, the classics: Christian Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A reinterpretation of Muslim theology* (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978); David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). And, more recently, Yasmin Saikia and Raisur Rahman (eds), *The Cambridge companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Khurram Hussain, *Islam as critique: Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the challenge of modernity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Amber Abbas, *Partition's first generation: Space, place, and identity in Muslim South Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); and Charles Ramsey, *God's words, spoken and otherwise: Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), revelation, and coherence* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

[4]See Tareen, *Perilous intimacies*, pp. 8–9.

[5]Hussain, *Islam as critique*.

[6]Brannon Ingram, 'Crises of the public in Muslim India: Critiquing "custom" at Deoband and Aligarh', in *Imagining the public in modern South Asia*, (eds) Barton Scott, Brannon Ingram and SherAli Tareen

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1850, was in large part inspired by Ismaʿil's work on this topic.[7] This is all to underscore a point made convincingly by Muhammad Qasim Zaman that the social and epistemological frontiers separating Muslim traditionalist and modernist scholars in colonial South Asia were markedly more porous and ambiguous than the defined and often irreconcilable nature of such divisions in post-colonial settings such as Pakistan.[8] Few scholars better exemplify this point than Sayyid Ahmad Khan.

But while recognizing these nuances and the limits of the modernist/traditionalist binary, one also ought not to undermine or minimize the very critical and substantive ways in which the normative sensibilities and reform project of a modernist scholar like Sayyid Ahmad Khan collided with a traditionalist world view. *Clarifying Faith* (*Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*), the focus of this article, is arguably the most instructive text and discursive site to highlight the divergent hermeneutics and politics of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the traditionalist 'ulama, especially the 'ulama of Deoband. Their disagreement, as I will show over the course of this article, reflected contrasting rationalities of tradition and reform in the rapidly transforming conditions of colonial modernity. Thus, through a close and intensive reading of a hugely instructive and profitable text, this article seeks to present the theological and hermeneutical underpinnings and fault lines of arguably the two most influential rationalities of religion in modern Muslim South Asia, represented in turn by the towering institutions and thought styles of Aligarh and Deoband.

The conceptual impetus and intervention

Before venturing further, let me briefly describe the conceptual impetus and intervention that animate this article. What constitutes authoritative religious knowledge in the aftermath of the end of political power and authority? This question captures the most consequential as well as vexing aspects of the encounter between the conditions of colonial modernity and South Asian Muslim intellectual traditions.[9] This broad question in turn pivots on three concomitant and connected questions: 1) What comprises the normative tradition and its sources of knowledge in a context marked by the loss of Muslim political sovereignty and enveloped by the political, institutional, and epistemic terrain of colonial modernity? 2) How should one interpret those sources of authoritative knowledge? 3) Who has the authority to do so? The Khan—Nanautvi debate that is the focus of this article centred in large measure on precisely these sorts of questions, situated at the intersection of knowledge, hermeneutics, theology, and religious authority.

As much as this debate was a product of ongoing intra-Muslim intellectual conversations predating the colonial period, its contours were equally shaped by the

(London; New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 47–62; SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), pp. 178–223.

[7]Tareen, *Defending Muhammad*, pp. 178–223.

[8]Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 15–53.

[9]For a thoughtful account of intra-Muslim traditions of critique and debate in colonial India, see Irfan Ahmad, *Religion as critique: Islamic critical thinking from Mecca to the marketplace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

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transformations wrought by British colonialism in India. One can identify three major domains of modern colonial transformations that provided the fodder for the conditions for the emergence and efflorescence of the competing movements of religious reform examined in this article: political, technological, and epistemological. First, the loss of Muslim political sovereignty, especially in the years following the 1857 rebellion, intensified and made more urgent the question of how one ought to imagine the normative limits of Islam and Muslim identity.[10] The answers presented to this pressing question, though, were varied and various. The institutions and thought styles of Aligarh and Deoband embody two of the most influential and consequential Muslim reformist responses to the political precarity of the colonial moment. Second, technologically, the expansive proliferation of published texts like *Clarifying Faith* and the increasingly defined and contested character of an Indian Muslim public that it sought to reach and persuade were both made possible by new technologies like print, the postal services, the railways, and the telegraph.[11] To be sure, the Khan–Nanautvi debate was an instance of a specialist, elite moment of intellectual contest. But crucial to its organizing logic was the mandate of pastoral care and protection for the Indian Muslim masses in a marketplace of ideas marked by unprecedented competition and adversarial activity. Such a notion of a doctrinally competitive public sphere with multiple possibilities of normative belonging and orientation was in large measure facilitated by technologies of colonial modernity, especially print. And third, and most substantive, were the elevation of modern science as the most rationally acceptable form of knowledge,[12] the valorization of ideals like individual autonomy, and the convictions of a modern secularity inherently suspicious of phenomena such as miracles and the supernatural. The pressure of these epistemological transformations of colonial modernity was central to instigating the competing theologies of religious form examined in this article.

In his thought-provoking and philosophically wide-ranging work, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, political theorist Michael Gillespie describes the modern quandary through the graphic imagery of what he calls 'the experience of an abyss' in which 'the meaningfulness and legitimacy of all existing ways of thinking and being dissolve', impelling 'human beings to search for answers, to formulate new ways of thinking and being, and thus to radically reshape the world in which they live'.[13] But to this note of radical rupture and transformation Gillespie adds the critical and useful commentary that, for all the ways that modernity might 'propel humanity in new directions and toward new answers … human beings always formulate these answers *within prevailing conceptual structures*'.[14] Gillespie's larger project in this book is to interrupt modernity's self-proclaimed rupture from a religious past by documenting its deep entanglement

[10]See Tareen, *Defending Muhammad*; Tareen, *Perilous intimacies.*

[11]See Francis Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, February 1993, pp. 229–251; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The ulama in contemporary Islam: Custodians of change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[12]See Gyan Prakash, *Another reason: Science and the imagination of modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Peter Gottschalk, *Religion, science, and empire: Classifying Hindus and Muslims in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[13]Michael Gillespe, *The theological origins of modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 13.

[14]Ibid.; emphasis mine.

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with vexing Western theological discourses and debates, especially those emanating from Christian nominalism and the responses to it.

What I find most useful in Gillespie's argument and framing for my purposes here is his juxtaposition of the uncertainty over what counts as legitimate and authoritative during the modern moment and condition and the importance of responding to that challenge with 'new answers' *that are yet situated within prevailing conceptual structures of legitimacy and authority*.[15] The intra-Muslim disagreement explored in this article is located in a very similar problem space. The legitimacy and credibility of answers to new questions about Islam and its sources emerging from the uncertainty of colonial modernity depended on the coherence and alignment of those answers with prevailing conceptual structures and expectations of moral argument within the tradition. The greater the rupture or its perception, the more critical it is that it is mended with the adhesive glue of stable inheritance. In a nutshell, this article presents an example of the intellectual density and creativity put on display by two disagreeing, yet equally authoritative, Muslim scholars who articulated opposing answers to the common question of how one ought to secure and solidify the normative edifice of tradition during a moment of change and uncertainty.

Through a close reading of the most significant points of debate made visible during Sayyid Ahmad Khan's intellectual disagreement with Qasim Nanautvi, I hope to clarify as well as complicate the theological foundations of the Aligarh–Deoband divide in South Asian Islam, the repercussions and reverberations of which continue to percolate in post-colonial South Asia. Moreover, I will also argue that embedded within Khan's and Nanautvi's competing positions on critical questions of theology and hermeneutics were two competing visions and imaginaries of religion in modernity. The debate between Khan and Nanautvi, as I will have occasion to repeat later, was not polemical or combative. However, its respectful decorum and rather nuanced logics of opposition should not lead us to underestimate the significance of the normative fault lines it made visible. Capturing some of these fault lines by walking readers through the texture, analytical moves, ambiguities, and consequences of Khan's and Nanautvi's arguments about how one ought to imagine and interpret the normative architecture of Islam in conditions of colonial modernity is the central aim of this article. In current scholarship, there exist some excellent social, institutional, and intellectual histories of Aligarh and Deoband, in addition to more focused studies of cognate thought trends in modern South Asian Islam.[16] Building on these works, my purpose in writing this article is to clarify and analyse competing conceptions of the hermeneutical infrastructure that inform rival visions of how knowledge, theology, and practice must interact during the modern moment.

In other words, what precisely are the epistemological and interpretive questions at work and at stake in the theological debates that occupied the pioneers of Aligarh and Deoband? And in what ways do the outcomes and consequences of these debates emerge as the ground of contestation for what South Asian Islam and Muslim identity should represent in conditions of colonial modernity? These are among the larger

[15]Emphasis mine.

[16]Most notably, these include: Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation*; Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and Zaman, *The ulama in contemporary Islam*.

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questions I hope to address in what follows. In this article I also want to offer a more thickly textured analysis of the Muslim traditionalist or ʻulama response and objection to the theological foundations of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's modernism which goes deeper than commonplace polemical representations of Khan as, say, a naturalist (*nechari*) by the traditionalists. I want to do so by highlighting instead the specific and often sophisticated points of contention at play in this debate with important implications for South Asian Islam and Muslims even today.

Before proceeding, a couple of very brief clarifying comments. By analysing a debate between the founders of Aligarh and Deoband (the movements, not towns, obviously) as a way to interrogate two major streams of modern South Asian Muslim thought, I do not mean to suggest that Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Qasim Nanautvi are the sole or exclusive representatives of these institutions and thought styles. In fact, Khan's initial letter that sparked off this correspondence was addressed generally to the ʻulama of Deoband. This exchange might have had a very different texture and sensibility had it not landed on Nanautvi's desk but that of another Deoband pioneer, such as, for example, the school's co-founder Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1906). This article thus centres on a contingent discursive encounter that offers a particularly fertile ground for examining a significant and enormously consequential intra-Muslim disagreement.

And, second, it should be noted that despite their often-serious theological differences, scholars attached to the institutions of Aligarh and Deoband have also historically shared overlapping intellectual networks and projects. So, for instance, the noted late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Deoband scholar and revolutionary ʻUbaydullah Sindhi (d. 1944), who held Nanautvi in great reverence, saw and cited himself as a bridge between Aligarh and Deoband.[17] To mention another example, it often goes unmentioned that although a graduate of Aligarh, the legendary twentieth-century Pathan political thinker and activist ʻAbdul Ghaffar Khan (d. 1988), who led the famous *Khuda'i Khidmatgar* or Servants of God Movement, cultivated and maintained bosom relations with the ʻulama of Deoband, especially Sindhi and the widely influential Shaykh al-Hind Mahmud Hasan (d. 1920). Ghaffar Khan presented a moving account of his relationship with Deoband ʻulama in his voluminous Pashto autobiography *My Life and Strivings* (*Za Ma Zhwand wa Jid o Juhd*).[18] But these examples of mutual exchange and cross-pollination should not lead us to undermine the substance or consequence of the epistemic divisions separating these schools of thought. In preparation for an exploration of some of these divisions, let me begin by considering Sayyid Ahmad Khan's theological defence of his normative project and the challenge it posed to the religious authority of the traditionalists or the ʻulama of South Asia.

The theological manifesto of Muslim modernism

Khan's written exchange with Nanautvi took place in 1874. It was initiated by Khan who, via an intermediary, Pir Ji Muhammad ʻArif (d. unknown), presented before Nanautvi 15 principles of faith and hermeneutics that Khan claimed formed the basis

[17] SherAli Tareen, 'Revolutionary hermeneutics: Translating the Qur'an as a manifesto for revolution', *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, vol. 3, no. 1–2, 2017, p. 7.

[18] Abdul Ghaffar Khan, *Za Ma Zhwand wa Jid o Juhd* (Kabul: Dawlati Matba, 1983), pp. 70–76.

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of his religious thought and reform agenda. 'These are the principles,' he quipped sarcastically, 'due to which I've been declared an apostate and unbeliever….please advise me if there is any error in them.'[19] The underlying principle that undergirded his list of 15 was that *once a Muslim believed in God and in the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, it was impossible for him/her to be faulted for unbelief*.[20]

The other most consequential principles he listed, which will also form the focus of my discussion, included statements such as: 1) 'God's and the Prophet's words cannot contradict truth or empirical reality' (*khilaf-i haqiqat awr khilaf-i waqiʿa*), 2) 'when any verse in the Qur'an seems to contradict truth or empirical reality, there are only two possible explanations for this apparent contradiction: either we have misunderstood that Qur'anic verse or we have erred in our understanding of truth and empirical reality. Any explanation other than these two possibilities from a Qur'an commentator or scholar of Hadith is unacceptable', 3) 'only normative injunctions derived from revealed texts [such as the Qur'an] are conclusive; the rest based on the exercise of human reason (*ijtihad*) and analogical approximation (*qiyas*) are speculative (*zanni*)', 4) 'all normative injunctions in Islam are compatible with nature (*fitrat*); if they were not so the blind would sin for not seeing and a person with eyesight would sin for seeing'. And the principle that most directly undercut the authority of the ʿulama reads:

> 5) 'The words and actions of any human other than Prophet Muhammad are normatively acceptable and authoritative in matters of religion only when they are supported by the Prophet's words and actions. And [concomitantly], refusing to accept all humans other than the Prophet [as sources of religious normativity] cannot necessitate unbelief. Denying this principle constitutes partnership in prophethood (*shirk fi'l nubuwwa*). The intended objective of this principle is to establish that just as Prophet Muhammad's stature is radically superior to that of common people, so too are his words and actions.'[21]

Presented below are the remaining ten theological and hermeneutical principles proffered by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, in the order in which they appear in *Clarifying Faith*. For the reader's benefit, I have emphasized (in italics) the particularly critical principles or the particularly noteworthy statements within the articulated principles that will also figure prominently in my subsequent analysis.[22]

[19] Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*, p. 323.

[20] Emphasis mine.

[21] Ibid., pp. 323–325.

[22] The translation of the ten principles below and the five above are my own. I have consulted the translation provided by Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* in an appendix and corrected some of its errors while also trying to offer a more accessible and lucid translation than his. Other than minor, though cumulatively significant, stylistic quibbles, my most substantive disagreement with Troll lies in his translation of '*majazan*' as 'allowed to do so' in the context of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's principle that in worldly matters Muslims need only follow the Prophet's normative model figuratively (*majazan*). I retain the sense of analogical in my rendering as it connects better with the larger distinction between literal/obligatory and analogical/non-obligatory aspects of the Prophet's normative model that Khan articulated, and with the broader distinction between the literal (*haqiqi*) and figurative (*majazi*) from Muʿtazili thought that he is drawing on. I remain indebted, however, to Troll's book which is still, more than 40 years after its publication, the richest study of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's religious thought.

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1. God, the singular, the possessor of eternal glory, is the creator of the entire universe.
2. The Quran without doubt represents God's speech (*kalam-i ilahi*). No word in the Quran contradicts truth or empirical reality.
3. All of God's speech that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad is found between the two covers of the Quran (*bayn al-daffatayn*), not a word lies external to it. If this was not true, then no verse in the Quran would remain dependable as a normative source for correct belief and practice. This is so because otherwise, one would always be hounded by the doubt that verses allegedly not included in the current text of the Quran contradict those found in it. The mere absence of a [Quranic] verse cannot be taken as proof for its non-existence.
4. In religious matters, we [Muslims] are compelled to follow the normative model of the Prophet (*sunnat* Ar. *sunnah*) *but in regard to worldly matters only figuratively (majazan)*. By *sunnat* is meant normative injunctions of the religion (*ahkam-i din*).
5. *A human cannot be held morally responsible (mukallaf) for something beyond his/her [intellectual] capacity (kharij az taqat-i insani)*. So, for instance, if humans are required to have faith [in God], then it is necessary that faith and its connected normative principles on which salvation (*nijat*) rests must not exceed the grasp of the human intellect. To elaborate, for instance, we are required to have faith in the existence of God but we are not held accountable for knowing the condition/quiddity of God's essence (*mahiyyat-i zat*).
6. Actions that are [normatively] commanded (*af'al-i ma'mura*) are in and of themselves good (*hasan*) while actions that are [normatively] forbidden (*af'al-i mamnu'a*) are in and of themselves bad (*qabih*). The reason for their goodness or badness can only be specified by the Prophet, much like a doctor informs the patient about the benefit and harm of particular medicines. Here the word 'actions' is used in its most general sense to include actions emanating from the limbs as well as the heart.
7. Among the capacities (*quwwa*) generated by God in humans there exist capacities that propel humans to commit a particular act and then there are capacities that enable humans to not commit a particular act. While humans are free to employ these varied capacities as they wish, God knows from the beginning of eternity which human will bring to use which capacity in what way. Nothing will happen contradictory to what [is already] in God's knowledge. But from this one can also not assume that humans are coerced into employing or avoiding particular capacities either, so long as they possess those capacities.
8. The category of religious injunctions/laws (*ahkam-i din*) represents the sum total of injunctions that are conclusively revealed by God (*yaqini min Allah*).
9. Islamic religious laws are of two kinds. First is the category of laws that form the foundation of the religion (*asli ahkam-i din*); *these laws are fully compatible with the laws of nature*. And the second category comprises of laws that are meant for safeguarding and preserving the first category of foundational laws. In terms of the obedience [they demand] and the practices [they prescribe], however, both categories of laws are equal in status.
10. All actions and words that emanated from Prophet Muhammad were based on truth and sincerity of purpose; they were not animated by considerations of

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> temporary expedience or convenience (*maslahat-i waqt*). Attributing to him the motivation of expedience is a grave breach of etiquette bordering on unbelief. (Here, the word 'temporary expedience' (*maslahat-i waqt*) is used in the common sense it is referred to today, meaning to say or do something out of place (*be ja*) only for the sake of fulfilling an immediate temporary expedience.)[23]

Sayyid Ahmad Khan concluded his comments by adding this postscript to his list of 15 principles, 'Though there are some other principles as well, but give or take a couple, these are the [fifteen] principles that have informed whatever I have ever written. Now if the respected scholars of Saharanpur [a major centre of Deoband scholars] could kindly inform me about the errors of these principles, I would be most grateful. Salam. Sayyid Ahmad.'[24]

In a certain sense, one can read the 15 principles of Sayyid Ahmad Khan that I have translated and transcribed above as a theological manifesto of Muslim modernism. They are premised on such signature modernist objectives as establishing concordance between scripture and empirical reality, valorizing the Quran and the Prophet's normative model as sources of religious normativity while downplaying the role of traditionalist protocols of hermeneutics, and curating a paradigm of salvation that tethers together revelation, nature, and the human intellect. Moreover, written in 1874, 17 years after the 1857 rebellion that not only saw the consolidation of British colonial power but also a flurry of Christian missionary activity in northern India that was often particularly hostile to Islam and Muslims, Khan's 15 principles were responding to the anxieties generated by this new set of conditions.[25] Particularly pressing in this regard was the pressure to establish Islam's, and more specifically the Quran's, concordance and compatibility with new Western scientific precepts and discoveries. Strikingly, for example, Khan had also published a treatise in 1874 called *An Exegesis on Skies* (*Tafsir al-Samawat*) that sought to reconcile the Quran with the Copernican world view.[26] This was an outcome of a significant evolution in Khan's thought. In fact, as late as 1848, in a text he wrote called *Qawl-i Matin*, he had painstakingly advocated a Ptolemean world view.[27] But from the 1870s onwards, with the further entrenchment of British colonial power and Christian missionaries, he adopted a 'world-view that excluded the possibility of intervention from the supernatural, professing all created reality to be governed by a universal, uniform and "unbreakable" system of natural laws potentially fully accessible to human reason'.[28]

Despite his modernist agenda and the looming shadow of modern colonial power over his thought, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was keenly aware of and interested in establishing the normative soundness of his theological and epistemological programme precisely through traditional sources and arguments of authority. As much as Khan's 15 principles represent a response to the horizons and pressures of colonial modernity, they also belonged equally to an ongoing Islamic discursive tradition, even as he strove

[23] Listed in Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*, pp. 323–325.

[24] Ibid., p. 326.

[25] For a detailed study of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's engagement with the Bible, see Ramsey, *God's words*.

[26] Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, p. 156.

[27] Ibid., p. 147.

[28] Ibid., pp. 183–184

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to expand and rework the interpretive parameters of that tradition. In fact, it is not exactly the quest to establish Islam's compatibility with colonial modernity, popularly understood as the underlying feature of Muslim modernism, that animated Khan's discourse. Though some of his principles explicitly, and others implicitly, paved the way for a decisively modernist articulation of Islam, his immediate goal was to cement his reform project as an affirmation of, rather than a departure from, the authoritative logics of traditional Sunni normativity.

Setting aside the evaluative question of how successful or convincing Khan was at this task, among the most consequential outcomes of his 15 principles was the challenge they posed to the religious authority of traditionalist scholars or the ʻulama. Circumscribing the interpretation of the Quran and the Prophet's normative model to compatibility with nature and empirical reality, privileging the Quran as a source of normativity while de-privileging juridical reasoning, and delimiting human accountability in the afterworld to forms of knowledge comprehensible to the human intellect were all consequential propositions that presented a subtle yet direct threat to the conceptual assumptions and architecture on which the authority of the ʻulama (as the inheritors and gatekeepers of the tradition) rested. On the surface, the 15 principles proffered by Khan come across as rather standard theological dicta that, for the most part, can be read as reasonably logical and uncontroversial. What bone of contention might one possibly pick, for instance, with such generalized and seemingly innocuous statements as 'all actions and words that emanated from Prophet Muhammad were based on truth and sincerity of purpose', 'God is the eternal creator of the universe', or with well-known terminological distinctions such as that between laws based on conclusive proof texts (*ahkam-i mansusa*) and those derived from juridical reasoning (*ijtihad*)? Moreover, several of Khan's stated principles were also not without precedence in premodern Muslim intellectual traditions, especially Mu'tazili thought. For example, his differentiation between obligatory and figurative obedience to the Prophet's normative model in religious and worldly matters respectively, which I address more fully below, seems clearly informed by the distinction between literal or real (*haqiqa*) and figurative (*majaz*) actions and attributes developed in different ways by Muʻtazili theologians such as the tenth-century theologian al-Nashi' al-Akbar (d. 906) who had contended that 'only God is really and literally (*fi'l haqiqa*) knowing, capable, acting, and just; man is all this in a figurative sense (*fi'l majaz*)'.[29]

To take another example, Khan's principle that Quranic verses can never be at odds with empirical reality, and his concomitant assertion that those seemingly so ought to be read metaphorically, were clearly informed by the emphasis on metaphorical readings of the Quran in the thought of the towering late eleventh-/early twelfth-century Muʻtazili Quran exegete Abu al-Qasim al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144). Similarly, Khan's larger and central quest to establish compatibility between the Quran and modern science was inspired by the attempt to coalesce rationalist and revealed knowledges (*maʻqulat wa manqulat*) by the pre-eminent twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198). Thus, even as Khan inserted the categories of knowledge that had

[29]Wolfhart Heinrichs, 'On the figurative (majaz) in Muslim interpretation and legal hermeneutics', in *Interpreting scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Overlapping categories*, (eds) Mordechai Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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leavened the work of these premodern luminaries into decisively modern registers—for instance, the *ma'qulat* translated as modern science—his discursive apparatus was nonetheless shaped in conversation with important sources of authority from within the Islamic intellectual tradition. This is an important point, not only because it highlights the hermeneutical grounding of Khan's intellectual project in traditional Islamic sources of authority. Moreover, it also helps us to see that the newness of his ideas was not the primary problem with Khan's thought for the traditionalists of his time or later.

Rather, what made Khan's 15 principles a source of alarm and objection for a major Muslim traditionalist like the Deoband founder Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi was the seductive simplicity with which they were presented, bereft of the necessary qualifiers, commentary, and notes of caution that ought to accompany such grand theological proclamations with far-reaching normative consequences. Describing the normative precepts and foundations of the religion in such broad strokes erased crucial hermeneutical complexities; for Nanautvi, this erasure lent a misguided and ultimately harmful sense of empowerment to both the common folk as well as to the scholarly class. But before I get to Nanautvi's thought, let me present a more detailed account of the major interpretive and theological assumptions and goals that underlay Sayyid Ahmad Khan's 15 principles just outlined and discussed.

Reason, religion, and the law of nature

For a fuller elaboration of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's theological agenda, especially in regard to his insistence on the necessity of the Quran's compatibility with the precepts and discoveries of modern science, we can gainfully turn to another of his texts called *An Essay on the Principles of Qur'an Commentary* (*Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*) composed in 1892.[30] Curiously, much like *Clarifying Faith*, this text also represents an exchange of letters, though this time Sayyid Ahmad Khan's interlocutor was his bosom friend and later founding member of the All India Muslim League, Muhsin ul-Mulk (also known as Sayyid Mahdi 'Ali; d. 1907). In his correspondence with Khan, Muhsin ul-Mulk had critiqued and raised objections to Khan's Quran commentary titled *Tafsir ul-Qur'an* (published in 1880) on precisely the issue of privileging modern science as a determiner of Quranic interpretations, especially regarding verses that apparently seemed to contradict modern scientific knowledge. Khan's reply to this charge is perhaps his most detailed explication of the hermeneutical and theological principles that informed his thought and discourse. At the heart of Khan's explanation was the claim that 'the word of God' and 'the work of God' (both phrases used in the English by Khan) cannot differ from each other. If the 'work of God', as manifested in nature and natural phenomena was at odds with the 'word of God' as communicated in divine revelation, then that would necessitate the falsity of revelation. Why? Because, Khan clarified, the operations of nature and natural phenomena were undeniable and visibly obvious. Thus, if divine revelation contradicted the apparent 'law of nature (*qanun-i fitrat*)' then that would mean that God's words were false, which was impossible.[31] Crucially, according to Khan, although the 'law of nature' was ultimately God's creation and imposition on the material world, it could not contradict the conclusions about nature

[30]Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir* (Agra: Matba' Mufid-i 'am, 1892).
[31]Ibid., p. 11.

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drawn by modern science. The revelations of modern science, so to say, only confirmed and made known what was already contained in divine revelation but undiscovered by human intellect. In other words, the discoveries of modern science represented deferred realizations of God's primordial law of nature. But despite Khan's concerted alignment of the 'law of nature' derived from modern science with that from God's revelation, clearly it was modern scientific knowledge about nature that was incontrovertible, obvious, and that thus served as the ultimate epistemological pivot on which the veracity of divine revelation rested. I will return to this important ambiguity in a bit. But first, let us explore in some depth the trajectory and reasoning of Khan's argument, a critical part of which was indeed connected to how he understood the category of reason or '*aql*.

According to Khan, the capacity to reason ('*aql*) is precisely the quality that distinguishes humans from non-humans. Reason is what enables humans 'to shoulder the weight of religion', in Khan's vivid description. Reason is the gift that qualifies them as the primary recipients of religion, and they are then held morally accountable (*mukallaf*) for fulfilling religious dictates and obligations. Therefore, Khan reasoned, religious discourse, including divine revelation, must not exceed or venture beyond the capacity of human reason ('*aql-i insani keh ma-fawq na ho*). And more importantly, humans cannot be held morally accountable for any religious precept or obligation that exceeds human reason. Holding humanity morally accountable for that which is beyond human reason would be akin to, according to Khan's analogy, rendering 'a donkey accountable for embracing the moral good and rejecting what is forbidden (*amr wa nahy*) or appointing that donkey the judge of Jaunpur'.[32] At the heart of Khan's argument was the claim that since God is the author of the law of nature (*qanun-i fitrat*), the manifestations of which are seen in natural phenomena and all aspects of material existence (what he termed 'the work of God'), God's words or divine revelation cannot oppose the law of nature. To repeat and summarize his point: 'the work of God' (nature and material existence) can never oppose 'the word of God' (divine revelation).

But what then was one to do and how was one to make sense of those several moments in the Quran that did apparently oppose the law of nature as understood through the insights of modern science? It is Khan's response to this central question that gets to the kernel of his theological programme, and that also became the primary object of rebuke by his intellectual opponents, especially among the 'ulama. Sayyid Ahmad Khan drew on the long-running Mu'tazili hermeneutical position of approaching figuratively (*majazan*) Quranic verses that seem to oppose human rationality so as to advance the thoroughly modern argument that moments in the Quran that contravene modern science must be read figuratively. In fact, and more precisely, Khan argued that in the case of such verses, one must assume that God intended them to be read figuratively rather than literally.[33] To assemble his case, Khan took the example of Quranic verses dealing with prophetic miracles and narratives. This was a domain, he argued, where traditionalist 'ulama, both past and present, had significantly erred by insisting on reading literally such verses that conflicted with the law of nature as a way of proving the authenticity of prophetic miracles. Their inability to

[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid., p. 56.

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adopt a more sophisticated hermeneutical apparatus while engaging the words that comprised these Quranic verses was due to three major reasons. First, traditionalist Quran commentators were so enthralled and their hearts so captivated by narratives of prophetic miracles that they failed to pay attention to specific words that cried out for hermeneutical attention and alternate readings. Second, prophetic miracles provided traditionalist scholars with a convenient means to amplify divine sovereignty. And third, and most instructive in the context of this article, Khan argued that 'in the premodern era the "natural sciences" [English words used by Khan] had not advanced as much; thus, the Muslim traditionalists of that time had no discursive means to invigilate against interpretations of the Qur'an that contravened the law of nature'.[34] Let me demonstrate Khan's dissatisfaction with prevailing norms of Quran interpretation and his proposed hermeneutical alternative through an example.

For instance, Khan argued, 'in their time [the time of premodern Quran commentators] it was not known that for Noah's flood to encompass the entirety of the earth and for its water to rise above the peak of tall mountains was impossible and opposed to empirical reality (*khilaf-i waqi*')'.[35] Similarly, Khan continued, 'there exists no conclusive evidence (*nass-i sarih*) in the Qur'an that in reality a fish had indeed swallowed Jonah [as the traditionally accepted prophetic narrative goes]'.[36] But what is one to make then of the verse Quran 37:142 which clearly reads 'then the great fish swallowed him [Jonah] while he was blameworthy (*fa'ltaqamahu al-hut wa huwa mulim*)'? Khan's answer to this obvious objection presents a specific illustration of his preferred hermeneutical method. He argued that the Arabic verb *iltaqama*, conventionally understood as 'he swallowed' [the third person past tense of form eight of the roots *la-qa-ma*] in fact only meant 'to hold [something] in the mouth' or to 'hasten eating' (*sur'at al-akal*). For God to have actually meant 'swallowed', the verb *ibtala'a* [the third person past tense of form eight of the roots *ba-la-'a*] would and should have been used. In his view, it is *ibtala'a* not *iltaqama* that conclusively means '[the fish] swallowed'. Khan's argument here was rather weak and idiosyncratic. A classical source, like the eleventh-century Quran exegete al-Raghib al-Isfahani's (d. 1108) famous dictionary of Quranic terms *Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an*, to the well-known twentieth-century Arabic-English dictionary of Hans Wehr (d. 1981), are quite clear that *ibtala'a* and *iltaqama* are essentially synonymous in meaning 'to swallow up'.[37] There is no substantive reason why *iltaqama* could not mean 'it [the fish] swallowed' or, for it to mean so, God had to have employed the verb *ibtala'a*, as Khan had insisted.

But more than the linguistic merits of his point here, what deserves notice is the reason that prompted him to partake in these linguistic gymnastics to begin with. That reason was that the occurrence of a fish swallowing Jonah, however great that fish might be, was to Khan in conflict with the law of nature and thus impossible according to human reason as informed by modern science. So, when confronted with such a moment in the Quran, it was incumbent upon the reader and interpreter to

[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., p. 57.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Compare al-Raghib al-Isfahani, *Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2021), pp. 125 and 590, with Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English dictionary* (Urbana, IL: Spoken Language Services, 1993), pp. 89 and 1026.

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offer an interpretation that did not oppose the law of nature, or else God's words (the Quran/divine revelation) would stand in opposition to God's works (nature). And to achieve this desired outcome, the Quran interpreter could mine for alternate meanings of specific words, as Khan had done here and/or read specific words figuratively as meaning something other than the literal or apparent meaning that contravened the law of nature. To state this hermeneutical principle in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's own words, 'when the [literal or apparent] meanings of words in the Qur'an are impossible according to reason and oppose the law of nature explicated by God himself or established through the experience [of empirical reality], then alternate meanings of those words must be sought'.[38]

An interesting and important ambiguity that emerges here—and one that Khan was keenly aware of as he explicitly sought to address it—was this: what would happen if future scientific knowledge and discoveries revealed the inadequacy or falsity of current [late nineteenth century] scientific knowledge and discoveries on which the current conception of the 'law of nature' rested? If the Quran was to be viewed as entirely compatible and epistemologically aligned with the 'law of nature' as currently understood, would its future invalidation also invalidate the Quran? Sayyid Ahmad Khan's answer was 'no, it would not'. Why? Because, he argued, alongside updated conceptions of 'the law of nature', we would also update our interpretation of the Quran. But critically, that updated interpretation would not reflect or show any defect in the Quran but would rather represent the manifestation of humanity's constantly evolving, yet always incomplete, understanding of God's 'law of nature'. In other words, Khan was at pains to impress the point that though what he was calling the 'law of nature' or '*qanun-i qudrat*' was bound to the empirical realities and limits established by modern science, God was nonetheless its underlying author and architect.[39] Scientific discoveries and advancements over time only further revealed and confirmed God's primordial law of nature that manifested and became visible in the temporal world over time. But despite Sayyid Ahmad Khan's deliberate efforts to establish the primacy of the divine authorship of the 'law of nature', it was ultimately the knowledge and conclusions of modern science that determined one's conception of nature's operations and parameters. And this is precisely where Sayyid Ahmad Khan departed from premodern thinkers like Ibn Rushd to whom he was otherwise obviously heavily indebted, as I have previously shown. As Christian Troll nicely sums up 'He [Khan] differs from Ibn Rushd in that he attaches to the result of modern natural sciences—notwithstanding the empirical, inductive method on which it is based—full demonstrative value.'[40] Even apart from the issue of a break with precedence, this ambiguity over the seeming priority of modern scientific knowledge over divine revelation in Khan's thought was a cause of considerable consternation for his intellectual opponents among the 'ulama, like Qasim Nanautvi. Why? Because it threatened to subvert the very hierarchy of knowledge that, to them, ensured the coherence and sanctity of Islam as a normative religious tradition. I now turn to some major aspects

[38]Khan, *Tahrir fi Usul al-Tafsir*, p. 52.
[39]Ibid., pp. 61–62.
[40]Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, p. 170.

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of Nanautvi's response to Khan, with a view to further elucidating the subtle yet serious theological disagreements that separated these two prominent rationalities of tradition and reform in modern Muslim South Asia.

Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi: An arch traditionalist in modernity

Hailing from the village of Nanautah in Uttar Pradesh, northern India, and one of the founders of the Deoband Madrasa, Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi is a towering figure in the intellectual history of Islam in South Asia. An illustrious jurist, theologian, and a major Sufi master, Nanautvi's intellectual lineage included such notable stalwarts as Mamluk 'Ali (d. 1851), the long-standing professor of Arabic at Delhi College, with whom Sayyd Ahmad Khan had also studied; Shah 'Abdul Ghani, a noted scholar and transmitter of hadith and not to be confused with one of Shah Wali Ullah's sons by the same name, with whom Nanautvi studied hadith; and Haji Imdadullah Muhajir Makki (d. 1899) who served as the Sufi master of all major Deoband pioneers. Nanautvi also trained students who went on to become the most prominent stars in the galaxy of modern South Asian Islam, most notably Mahmud Hasan (d.1920), popularly remembered by the honorific 'The Master Scholar of India' (*Shaykh ul-Hind*).[41] Nanautvi's scholarly oeuvre was at once vast and multi-layered.

Though he died at the relatively young age of 44, he wrote prolifically on a broad range of subjects, including law, theology, philosophy, and Sufism. Most of his intellectual labour though remains thoroughly unexplored in the Western academy.[42] This is so, I would contend, largely because of his often challenging and inscrutable style of writing and mode of argumentation, which combines in rather unpredictable ways varied nodes from Islamic theology, philosophy, law, and mysticism. Even within the historiography of Deoband, Nanautvi is remembered as an extremely difficult writer whose deeply philosophical and esoteric orientation often made his thought impenetrable, even to his own peers. Ashraf 'Ali Thanvi (d. 1943), arguably the most prolific and pre-eminent Deoband scholar, who belonged to the generation immediately following Nanautvi's, once opined that if Nanautvi's texts were translated into Arabic and its readers were unaware of the author's name, they would certainly surmise that they were reading the works of premodern giants of the tradition like Imam Razi (Fakhr al-Din al-Razi d. 1210) or Imam Ghazali (Abu Hamid al-Ghazali d. 1111), meaning Nanautvi's works exuded the specialist sensibility of an author from a bygone era.[43]

Other than the dizzying multivalence of his scholarship, Nanautvi is also remembered in the biographical tradition attached to him as an avowedly reclusive and ascetic personality who shunned worldly attention as much as possible, despite his position as a leading Muslim scholar-cum-reformer of his era. Refraining from

[41] Hafiz Akbar Shah Bukhari, *Akabir-i 'Ulama'-yi Deoband* (Lahore: Idara-yi Islamiyyat, 1999), pp. 24–25.

[42] Notable exceptions are Fuad Naeem, 'Interreligious debates, rational theology, and the "ulamā" in the public sphere: Muḥammad Qāsim Nanautvī and the making of modern Islam in South Asia', PhD thesis, Georgetown University, 2015; and Atif Siddiqui, 'Theological and intellectual roots in Deobandi thought: A paradigm from Muḥammad Qāsim Nānawtawī's discourses with special reference to his Ḥujjat al-Islām', *American Journal of Islam and Society*, vol. 37, no. 1–2, 2020, pp. 41–66.

[43] Bukhari, *Akabir-i 'Ulama'-yi Deoband*, p. 26.

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stamping his authority by signing his name at the end of legal opinions (*fatawa*) and often shuddering at the thought of leading prayers for a congregation, Nanautvi's preferred attire also signalled his commitment to an ethic of self-effacement. Once, while travelling from Deoband to Nanautah, Nanautvi's extremely simple attire led a lower caste weaver (*julaha*) to mistake him for a member of his community. 'How much is yarn selling for today?' the weaver unwittingly enquired. Nanautvi replied, uninterested in correcting his interlocutor's mistake 'Not sure brother, have not had a chance to visit the market today.'[44] This well-known hagiographic vignette reveals at once narrative interest in assembling religious authority through the erasure of the worldly desire for social recognition and a thoroughly worldly and socially embedded class- and caste-driven imaginary.

In addition to arguably his most well-known theologically oriented texts such as *Qibla Like* (*Qibla Numa*),[45] *Heart Soothing Discourse* (*Taqrir-i Dilpazir*),[46] and *Clarifying Faith* (the focus of this article), Nanautvi is also known as an arch polemicist who engaged in a series of encounters, oral and written, with the Shiʿa and with leading Hindu reformers as well as Christian missionaries of his era.[47] The most memorable such polemic was what came to be known as the *Festival of Deciding the True God* (*Mailah-yi Khuda Shinasi*), also known as the *Polemic of Shahjahanpur* (*Mubahasa-yi Shahjahanpur*). During this interreligious polemical spectacle, held for two consecutive years in 1875 and 1876 in the village of Chandapur in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Nanautvi, Arya Samaj founder Dayananda Sarasvati (d. 1883), and prominent Christian missionaries of northern India locked horns for four consecutive days to debate and decide the authenticity of their respective religious traditions before an eagerly attentive crowd.[48] In his engagement with Sayyid Ahmad Khan, though steadfast in the expression of his convictions, Nanautvi's mode of disagreement was considerably more measured than what we find in some of his more polemical writings.

He began his reply to Khan with a rather cutting note of exasperation at what he viewed as the obstinate certainty with which Khan held onto his signature positions. 'He adamantly persists with his infamous positions and refuses to retract them…his style of writing evinces the stubborn surety of a person who thinks he can never be wrong,' Nanautvi protested.[49] Khan's 'infamous positions', as Nanautvi put it, included arguing for the non-existence of Satan or miracles, and the more general rationalist hesitation to accept any incongruence between revelation and empirical reality. While not disagreeing emphatically with any of the principles Khan had laid out, Nanautvi instead sought to pre-emptively quash what he considered the dangerous implications that their uncritical embrace risked. In his response to almost all of Khan's 15 principles, Nanautvi introduced and elaborated additional categories, nuances, and hermeneutical considerations that constricted as well as sharpened the scope and

[44]Ibid., p. 25.

[45]Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi, *Qiblah Numa* (Multan: Jami'ah Dar al-'Ulum Rahimiyyah, 2005).

[46]Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi, *Taqrir-i Dilpazir* (Deoband: Shaykh ul-Hind Academy, 1996).

[47]Abdul Quyyum Haqqani, *Tazkirah wa Savanih Al-Imam al-Kabir Mawlana Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi* (Nowshera: Al-Qasim Academy, 2012).

[48]For a detailed account of this fascinating interreligious polemic, see Tareen, *Perilous intimacies*, pp. 79–114.

[49]Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*, pp. 326–327.

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applicability of those principles. His main concern was to insert the layers of traditionalist hermeneutical density that he found to be missing in Khan's attractive, yet potentially misleading, formulations and applications of the tradition. Let me illustrate this point with a few examples.

Mind the haste! Engaging the tradition beyond modernist soundbites

Take, for instance, Nanautvi's response to Khan's proposition that 'God's and the Prophet's words cannot contradict empirical reality', closely connected to the latter's other principle that 'when any verse in the Qur'an seems to contradict truth or empirical reality, there are only two possible explanations for this apparent contradiction: either we have misunderstood that Qur'anic verse or we have erred in our understanding of truth and empirical reality'. Nanautvi agreed with the substance of these two statements. But he inverted the terms of their articulation, sensing and thus subverting the naturalist impulse to circumscribe revelation to empirical reality that seemed to animate them. In his own words,

> Yes, God's and the Prophet's words cannot contradict empirical truth and reality, but there is no better resource to discover truth and reality than God's and the Prophet's words. So, if any form of knowledge about the empirical world and reality opposes the Qur'an and authenticated sayings of the Prophet, it will be considered false. But this cannot work the other way around: God's and the Prophet's words cannot be falsified because of being contrary to empirical reality. [In other words], knowledge derived from the human intellect that contradicts revealed knowledge cannot be considered normatively sound and legitimate (*ishara-yi ʻaql muʻariz-i ishara-yi naql ho tuh hargiz qabil-i iʻtibar nahin*).[50]

Nanautvi's punchline went as follows: 'The *rational*[51] principle at work here thus is that the Qur'an and authenticated Hadith serve as the ultimate arbiters of what gets counted as sound and unsound rational proofs and not the other way around (*gharz ʻaql ki bat yeh hay keh kalam Allah awr ahadis-i sahiha namuna-yi sihat awr suqm-i dala'il-i ʻaqliyya samjhay ja'eyn nah bar ʻaks*).'[52]

On the surface, the difference between Nanautvi's and Sayyid Ahmad Khan's positions seems either negligible or more a product of semantic sequencing than substance. However, through his elaborations on Khan's stated principle, Nanautvi ensured that the hierarchy of knowledge between revelation and human rationality was not disturbed; in fact, he argued that revealed knowledge (the Quran and hadith) was the underlying source and criterion of rationality. So, while not disagreeing per se with Khan's statement, Nanautvi was keen to add a set of caveats that foreclosed the possibility of restricting the ambit of revelation to empirical reality, and thus of valorizing human rationality as a source of knowledge in competition or on par with revelation. These caveats were crucial for Nanautvi's purpose of reversing the emphasis in Khan's principle from according human rationality an amplified role in

[50] Ibid., pp. 328–329.
[51] Emphasis mine.
[52] Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*, p. 329.

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accessing revelation to rendering the former conclusively subservient to the latter. And Nanautvi made it a point to underscore that this reversal was not any less rational, but rather the reflection of a different mode of rationality than that entailed in Khan's ostensibly straightforward and non-controversial, yet on closer inspection, immensely consequential proposition.

Other than complicating binary framings of revelation and rationality, Nanautvi was also keenly interested in safeguarding a hierarchy of religious authority that did not allow unworthy entrants into the business of interpreting the tradition and positing its limits. In this regard, curiously, it is not the figure of the 'Muslim modernist' but that of 'half-baked religious scholars (*nim mullah*)' that Nanautvi explicitly named as potential agents of disturbance. Their eagerness to issue normative opinions and pronouncements on contentious issues competed fiercely with their lack of required knowledge and qualifications to do so. Let me explain this point and Nanautvi's larger argument about the relationship between religious authority and hermeneutics by elaborating his response to Khan's just mentioned principle that 'when any verse in the Qur'an seems to contradict truth or empirical reality, there are only two possible explanations for this apparent contradiction: either we have misunderstood that Qur'anic verse or we have erred in our understanding of truth and empirical reality'.

Remember, Khan had also added the statement, 'any explanation other than these two possibilities from a Qur'an commentator or scholar of Hadith is unacceptable'. Again, Nanautvi began with a note of feigned conciliation by seemingly agreeing with Khan: 'Yes, sure, neither a Hadith scholar's nor a Qur'an commentator's discourse is reliable if it contradicts God's speech. In fact, even a Hadith is considered false if it contradicts God's speech.'[53] Quickly switching from rhetorical play to considered argumentation, he continued:

> But comprehending [the notions of] contradiction and compatibility (*takhaluf awr tawafuq*) is not for the likes of us; it requires mastery over three kinds of knowledge: a) conclusive knowledge of Qur'anic meanings (*'ilm-i yaqini-yi ma'ani-yi Qur'ani*), b) conclusive knowledge of the discourse contradicting the Qur'an (*'ilm-i yaqini-yi ma'ani-yi qawl-i mukhalif*), and c) conclusive knowledge of the contradiction [at hand] (*'ilm-i yaqini-yi ikhtilaf*).[54]

A scholar who attained perfection over these three kinds of knowledge was as rare as he was fortunate, Nanautvi claimed, adding the more purposeful interjection, 'but for an ignorant person or a half-baked scholar (*nim mullah*) to interfere in such matters is just as out of place as the interference of a simpleton or a less qualified doctor in the affairs of a talented physician'.[55] Nanautvi admitted that a talented physician and, by analogy, an authoritative Quran commentator or scholar of hadith may well have an off day at work. On a rare occasion, an excellent physician's prescription might, due to human error or forgetfulness, contradict the laws of medicine, much like a Quran commentator or hadith scholar might on occasion interpret the Quran in a way that contradicted its desired meaning. However, Nanautvi emphasized, just as a clueless

[53]Ibid.
[54]Ibid., pp. 329–330.
[55]Ibid., p. 330.

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patient or amateur doctor has no business infringing on a qualified physician's domain of expertise, unearthing the meanings of Quranic verses is also a labour best avoided by a lightweight scholar.

In a gesture of strategic epistemological humility, Nanautvi proceeded to claim that even he or, for that matter, Sayyid Ahmad Khan did not possess the required knowledge or authority to conclusively determine and diagnose a moment of contradiction between the Quran and empirical reality. In fact, most premodern luminaries of the tradition, despite their expansive knowledge, avoided such determinations of contradiction.[56] In other words, for Nanautvi, the degrees and kinds of knowledge demanded by the task of establishing a moment of contradiction between the Quran and empirical reality (or nature) was too steep and impossible to render such a pursuit profitable or viable. Again, while agreeing with the surface of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's contention that the Quran cannot contradict empirical reality, Nanautvi punctured the larger normative purpose of that contention, namely to interlock the scope of scriptural interpretation with the data of empirical reality. He did so by presenting a series of additional considerations regarding the interaction of knowledge, theology, and hermeneutics. Nanautvi's normative purpose, in turn, was to limit the range of questions and puzzles that can be asked of the Quran, regulate the sorts of actors permitted to engage in such an interpretive enterprise, and thus preserve a hierarchy of knowledge and religious authority shielded from subversive hermeneutical enticements.

The battle for religious authority and its sources

The next example I want to discuss gets to the heart of the intra-Muslim debate on religious authority over which Sayyid Ahmad Khan disagreed with the pioneers of Deoband like Nanautvi, and indeed with Indian 'ulama more broadly. The example I have in mind concerns Khan's principle that 'The words and actions of any human other than Prophet Muhammad are normatively unacceptable in matters of religion unless that non-Prophet's words and actions are supported by the Prophet's words and actions. And [concomitantly], refusing to accept all humans other than the Prophet [as a source of religious normativity] cannot necessitate unbelief.' And remember, Khan had put forth an addendum to this principle with a critical and curiously phrased category: 'Anyone who does not adhere to these two propositions stands guilty of committing partnership in prophethood (*shirk fi'l nubuwwa*).'[57]

Again, apparently, there was nothing contentious about this principle. Recognizing the Prophet's uniqueness as a font of normativity and admitting the hierarchy of authority separating him from other humans seem like fairly standard doxological dicta that should not ruffle any traditionalist feathers. However, at issue again was the emphasis of Khan's formulation that was clearly aimed at undercutting the role and authority of the 'ulama as mediators between the Prophet and the people, while furthering the modernist mandate to erase human hierarchy in accessing normative knowledge. After all, the phrase 'refusing to accept all humans other than the Prophet [as a source of religious normativity] cannot necessitate unbelief' carried a

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid., p. 324.

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not-so-veiled attempt to deflate any sense of necessity to view the ʻulama as non-negotiable reference points of religious normativity. Moreover, by introducing the menacing spectre of 'polytheism in prophethood' for anyone who did not abide by this stated principle, Khan dramatically raised the stakes of the discussion.

In his signature style, Nanautvi took Sayyid Ahmad Khan to task for what he regarded as simplifying, to the point of distortion, a problem that demands many further layers of elaboration. Again, it is not the principle itself but its untethered application in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's hands that Nanautvi sought to challenge and thwart. Nanautvi quizzed Khan's proposition by furnishing his argument on the latter's own rationalist turf. He argued that if one began to question the normative authority of a discursive moment because its agent was not the Prophet, or his words were not directly sanctioned by the Prophet, then the very authority of the Prophet's own words or the hadith would itself become suspect. Why? Because, after all, Nanautvi reminded Khan, and all those enthralled by what Nanautvi regarded as Khan's modernist ruses, the narrators of the Prophet's sayings and actions such as the Prophet's Companions, were also non-prophets. But despite that, the knowledge that they generated about what the Prophet said or did is not questioned, and it is taken in good faith that what they are narrating about the Prophet is indeed true. Based on this assumption of good faith or positive outlook (*husn-i zann*; Ar. *husn al-zann*) regarding the hadith narrators, the hadith is embraced and accepted as a touchstone of normative knowledge that ought to inform the religious life of the community. Given that, Nanautvi wondered aloud: 'what sin have scholars of law and the jurists committed' that their positions and sayings are not accorded the same acceptability and positive outlook?[58]

The fundamental flaw in Khan's enticing, though problematic, formulation, which put all non-prophets on the same footing, was its lack of attention to the degrees and hierarchy of religious authority vested in different actors such as the Prophet and the later jurists. Let me further elaborate on Nanautvi's point. As the interpreters of law, Muslim jurists or the *fuqaha*' derive laws and normative injunctions (*ahkam*) that the community is obligated to follow. At times these laws might be based on direct references from the Quran and hadith—what Sayyid Ahmad Khan called 'the Prophet's words'—and at other times they might be based on their own legal reasoning, and thus represent their 'non-prophetic words'. Nanautvi's point was that these laws derived by Muslim jurists (*ahkam-i mustakhraja-yi fuquha*ʾ*-i muslimin*) are based on their legal reasoning and are not on the same normative plane as the injunctions that come directly from conclusive proof texts such as the Quran and/or the hadith (*ahkam-i mansusa*). As an analogy, he gave the example that the obligatoriness (*farziyyat*, Ar. *Fardiyya*) of the five daily prayers is not on the same plane as that of fasting, yet they are both obligatory.[59]

Similarly, although the words and positions of a jurist based on his legal reasoning are not on the same normative plane as the words of the Prophet, they are both salutary sources of religious normativity. When one accepts the words of the jurist

[58]Ibid., p. 332.

[59]Ibid. It seems that what Nanautvi means by this statement is that both in terms of the regularity with which the two rituals of praying and fasting are performed, and the consequences of their omission, they do not share the same normative plane, despite both having the status of being obligatory.

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(meaning his interpretation of the law) as a source of normativity, one does so on the assumption that those words do not occupy the same stature as the Prophet's words. But crucially, and here lay the kernel of Nanautvi's argument, recognizing a hierarchy (*tafawut*) of different sources of normativity did not puncture or undermine the authority or credibility of any of those sources occupying that hierarchy. Nanautvi summed up his argument with a couple of pithy statements; they are presented at different moments in the text that I bring together here for the reader's benefit: 'hierarchy of knowledge does not injure the authority of the knowledge source lesser in stature' and 'the hierarchy differentiating the Prophet's and the Muslim jurists' words has nothing to do with "polytheism in prophethood"'.[60] Nanautvi admitted this much from Khan's principle: refusing to accept the jurists' words and hence their authority does not constitute grounds for unbelief. But again, as if bidding farewell with a final punch to an already defeated opponent, he added the gloss, 'though for that matter, even refusing a single Hadith does not necessitate unbelief, but only a grave sin (*fisq*), and refusing to accept the jurist's normative authority also constitutes a sin even if much less grave'.[61]

Note again that in this last example Nanautvi did not disagree with the essence of Khan's stated position that privileged the Prophet as a source of normative guidance and laws. There was no disagreement about that. Rather, the point of contention and what posed a direct threat to the religious authority of the 'ulama was the unfettered manner (*ʿala al-itlaq*) in which Khan had presented his proposition with no commentary or restraining qualifiers. Thus, for Nanautvi this principle had less to do with amplifying the sacrality of the Prophet than it did with undermining the role and stature of the traditionalist scholarly class. In turn, throughout *Clarifying Faith*, he robustly defended that role and stature by unleashing the discursive arsenal of traditionalist hermeneutics and rationality that complicated and thereby unsettled what, to Nanautvi, were Khan's seductive but dangerously reductive modernist soundbites.

The hermeneutical disagreement between Khan and Nanautvi on this principle also revealed two competing models of imagining the Prophet and, by extension, two competing understandings of religion as a normative category. Notice that it is the modernist Khan whose conception of religion hinged on valorizing the Prophet as the linchpin of the normative architecture of Islam. It is by valorizing the Prophet that he sought to puncture the mediating authority of the 'ulama as the inheritors and interpreters of the tradition. In Khan's thought, a magnified stature of the Prophet and of his words and actions dovetailed with a minimalist notion of religious knowledge whereby non-prophetic traditions of knowledge held little importance in the moral fashioning of the individual and the community. Concentrating the locus of religious authority on the body of the Prophet offered the modernist promise of relieving Islam and Muslims from the weight of clerical knowledge traditions and norms of interpretation.

For Nanautvi, in contrast, there was no pressure or urgency to place all salvational eggs in the prophetic basket. To be clear, the Prophet as a subject and as a source of normative guidance and authority was no less sacrosanct for Nanautvi. However,

[60] Ibid., p. 334.

[61] Ibid., p. 333.

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the epistemic apparatus underlying his notion of religion and tradition included several further layers of interpretive machinery that could be called into operation while engaging and adjudicating on matters of moral significance. Khan's hermeneutical minimalism, coupled with his minimalist model of religious authority that overplayed the Prophet and undermined the ʻulama, while seemingly attractive, was bound to stultify the dynamism and complexity of Islam and its traditions of interpretation. For Sayyid Ahmad Khan, on the other hand, it is precisely the undue complexity and juggernaut of traditionalist protocols of knowledge production and interpretation that hindered—if not crippled—the capacity of Indian Muslims to wrestle confidently with the transformations of colonial modernity. The point I want to make is this: embedded in this apparently technical and specialist hermeneutical disagreement on the sources and priorities of religious authority were two contrasting and noticeably consequential models of religion and its normative architecture, irreducible to but yet corresponding with the assumptions and sensibilities of Muslim modernism and traditionalism.

Moral responsibility and human capacity

The next example I want to take up further clarifies the theological fault lines of Muslim modernism and traditionalism, though in a very different discursive register than the examples discussed thus far. I have in mind Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ostensibly straightforward, but in fact far-reaching, principle that 'a human cannot be held morally responsible (*mukallaf*) for something beyond his/her [intellectual] capacity (*kharij az taqat-i insani*). So, for instance, if humans are required to have faith [in God], then it is necessary that faith and its connected normative principles on which salvation (*nijat*) rests must not exceed the grasp of the human intellect.' Nanautvi responded to this principle with a curious statement. He said, 'not being able to be held morally responsible for that which exceeds human capacity is one thing and not being so is quite another (*insan ka kharij az taqat-i insani mukallaf na ho sakna awr hay awr na hona awr*)'.[62] He elaborated on this cryptic sounding statement by explaining that though humans are certainly not morally responsible for what exceeds their capacity, one cannot take this to mean that articles of faith and legal injunctions (*ahkam*) on which salvation rests must remain bounded by the limits of the human intellect. Why? Because, Nanautvi lectured, in the tone of a professor warming up to correct his pupil, the exemption from moral responsibility over that which exceeds human capacity (*taklif ma la yutaq*) concerns *only practices*[63] for which humans are held morally responsible (*aʻmal-i mukallaf bi-ha*). So, humans are not held morally responsible for practices that are beyond their capacities. But—and this was the crucial point for Nanautvi—this principle did not apply to the abstract concept of moral responsibility in and of itself (*taklif khud maqsud bi'l zat nahin*).[64]

Why would the differentiation between moral responsibility for individual practices and moral responsibility as an abstract concept be significant in the context of

[62]Ibid., p. 340.
[63]Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*.
[64]Ibid.

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this discussion? Because, if the principle that the moral responsibility of humans cannot exceed their capacities is limited to the category of practice, then the relevant capacity in question would also be that of the capacity for practice (*quwwat-i ʻamila*) and not that of the intellect (*quwwat-i ʻaqila*). Concomitantly, the incapacity (of the human intellect) to comprehend the often-hidden purpose or benefit of a practice cannot be held as grounds for exemption from the moral responsibility attached to that practice.[65] Again, the threat that Nanautvi perceived and sought to quell in Khan's apparently matter-of-fact principle that 'you are not morally responsible for whatever is beyond your capacity' was the invitation to seek out loopholes. Once the emphasis of the conversation shifted to the human intellect and the limits of its capacity, the temptation to search for avenues to undermine the scope of moral responsibility in the domains of faith and salvation under the pretext of the intellect's incapacities was inevitable, Nanautvi feared. For Nanautvi, thus, the implication and potentially the eventual outcome of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's principle was no less than a reversal of roles between the sovereign divine will that bound humans to God in a relationship of moral responsibility and the sovereignty of human reason and intellect to decide on humanity's moral responsibility to God. At stake in this disagreement was therefore a lot more than semantic texture and sequencing. Rather, the entire theological edifice of the tradition was at stake.

Imagining the Prophet beyond the religious and the secular

The next example I want to discuss is among the most-subtle yet substantive of all: that concerning Sayyid Ahmad Khan's stated principle that 'in religious matters, we (Muslims) are compelled to follow the normative model of the Prophet (*sunnat* Ar. *sunnah*) but in regards to worldly matters only figuratively (*majazan*). By *sunnat* I here mean normative injunctions of the religion (*ahkam-i din*).' Again, this principle reads as a rehearsal of the standard distinction in Islamic jurisprudence between the normatively demanded aspects of Prophet Muhammad's practice that relate to religion and that thus impact on a Muslim's salvational prospects and the non-normative dimensions of the Prophet's life that relate to his personal preferences and habits and that thus bear no salvational consequences. For Khan, Muslims were bound to the Prophet's practice in religious matters as though it were a text to be read and manifested literally. On the other hand, in non-religious worldly affairs, the Prophet's life was to be read figuratively (*majazan*) whereby its broader principles were analogically extended into one's own life rather than literally embraced and implemented. In effect, Khan transferred the hermeneutical distinction between literal and figurative or analogical speech, developed most systematically by Muʻtazili theologians in early Islam,[66] to the ontology of the Prophet and by extension to the choreography of the community's devotional and everyday practice.

While agreeing with the upshot of Khan's argument and the distinction between religious and worldly affairs on which it rested, Nanautvi was nonetheless troubled

[65] Ibid.

[66] See Robert Gleave, *Islam and literalism: Literal meaning and interpretation in Islamic legal theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); David Vishanoff, *The formation of Islamic hermeneutics: How Sunni legal theorists imagined a revealed law* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2011).

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by the binary terms in which Khan presented that distinction. The religious and the worldly (*dini wa dunyawi*) did not interact in the form of a secular binary but rather intersected along a porous continuum, Nanautvi argued. More specifically, he suggested that rather than the distinction between literal/obligatory and analogical/non-obligatory aspects of the Prophet's normative model, a more effective framing of the issue was available through the distinction between a command (*amr*) and counsel (*mashwara*).[67] To elaborate, if the Prophet commanded a particular practice as obligatory (*ijab*), then following it was also obligatory (*wajib*), and if he commanded a particularly practice as recommended (*istihbab*) but not obligatory, then its normative value or status for Muslims was also that of a recommendation (*mustahabb*).[68] This epistemological grid was not applicable to the Prophet's counsel or advice; it never reached the normative status of an obligation or a recommendation the commission or omission of which would generate salvational consequences. In a nutshell, Nanautvi summed up his point (thus far in seeming agreement with Khan) that the normative work of the prophets was to pave the path to salvation; they were not required to pave the path to worldly efflorescence (in matters unrelated to religion).[69]

However, and this qualifier was the key to his objection against Khan, though ensuring the worldly flourishing (*falah-i dunya*) of humans was not central to the prophetic job description, it nonetheless held ancillary relevance. Why? Because often, the pathways to worldly flourishing (*turuq-i falah-i dunya*) either oppose (*mu'ariz*) or reinforce (*muwafiq*) or neither oppose nor reinforce the pathways to salvational flourishing in the afterworld (*turuq-i falah-i akhirat*). Prophetic counsel, including Prophet Muhammad's counsel and advice to his community on non-devotional or worldly matters should thus be seen, Nanautvi argued, as an expression of the Prophet's pastoral concern that the relationship between worldly and salvational flourishing remains mutually reinforcing rather than oppositional. So, while the normative value of the Prophet's advice on worldly matters was neither one of obligation nor that of recommendation, there was no theological harm in embracing that advice either. In fact, Nanautvi further argued, in light of the Prophet's intellectual talent (*kamal-i 'aql*), giving precedence to his advice over that of others also entailed good etiquette (*husn-i adab*).[70] Notice how Nanautvi resisted the secular division of life between the religious and the worldly or the literal and the figurative by making the case for a clearly defined yet more fluid dynamic of interaction between varied modalities of the Prophet's authority, persona, and ontology.

Take, for instance, the Prophet's famous statement to his community 'you are more knowledgeable about your worldly affairs (*antum a'lam bi umur dunya-kum*)' given in the context of the backfiring of his advice to a group of people in Madina to not graft their trees. For Nanautvi, this prophetic saying did not affirm a secular bifurcation between the religious and the worldly, or between the public and the private compartments of the Prophet's life and being. Rather, this saying simply acknowledged the Prophet's

[67]Nanautvi, *Tasfiyat al-ʿAqaʾid*, p. 334.

[68]Ibid. Here Nanautvi is of course referencing the five major normative values of the shari'a corresponding with particular practices in a given set of conditions: obligatory (*wajib*), recommended (*mustahabb*), simply permissible (*mubah*), abominable (*makruh*), and forbidden (*haram*).

[69]Ibid., p. 335.

[70]Ibid.

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lack of dendrological expertise. Drawing conclusions beyond that by positing an inherent division or separation between the religious and the worldly—or what we might today call the religious and the secular—in the Prophet's ontological constitution was inappropriate, Nanautvi argued.[71]

Yet again, the substance of Nanautvi's disagreement with Sayyid Ahmad Khan was inextricable from the form and style of the latter's discourse. The delectable simplicity with which Khan had presented this and his other principles, absent the layers of elaboration and qualifiers that such knotty theological problems demanded, was sure to open the floodgates for carelessly hasty and self-serving conclusions and interpretations.

Can the Prophet lie?

My last illustrative example continues the thread on competing understandings of the Prophet but through a theme more explicitly focused on his personhood, as it has to do with the sensitive yet consequential question of whether Prophet Muhammad can lie or not. This question assumed centre stage in Nanautvi's response to Khan's last stated principle, that 'all actions and words that emanated from Prophet Muhammad were based on truth and sincerity of purpose; they were not animated by considerations of temporary expedience or convenience (*maslahat-i waqt*). Attributing to him the motivation of expedience is a grave breach of etiquette bordering on unbelief.' Again, this principle dovetailed neatly with Khan's modernist emphasis on an incorruptible Prophet whose words and actions, coupled with the Quran, represented the exclusive fulcrum of Islamic normativity, with little space for the normative authority of Muslim traditionalists or the 'ulama.

In Khan's religious imaginary, an interpretive ethic of hermeneutical minimalism that suppressed, if not jettisoned, the mediating authority of the Islamic legal tradition and its 'ulama custodians required, and was reinforced by, a fortified persona of the Prophet that was impervious to such mortal sins as lying or acting on the basis of temporary expedience. Qasim Nanautvi, on the other hand, while no less reverential of the Prophet, showed markedly greater confidence about and willingness to explore sensitive and potentially explosive issues such as the Prophet's capacity to lie. In fact, Nanautvi explicitly affirmed that capacity and saw no doctrinal landmines or pitfalls in the affirmation that the Prophet could indeed lie. In what follows, I wish to take readers through the key logics and moves that informed this position, as this will offer yet another illustration of a traditionalist aesthetic of argumentation in the face of a seemingly incontrovertible modernist dictum.

Nanautvi's argument pivoted on two points that he brought together to stage and cement its foundations. The first is that the qualitative status of 'lying' (*kizb Ar. kidhb*)—good or bad—is not absolute but rather contingent on the conditions and context in which an utterance contrary to reality (*khilaf-i waqi'*) is delivered. And second, that among the central tasks that make up the prophetic job description is that of ensuring the welfare of the community by repelling corruption and cultivating virtue and moral reform (*islah bayn al-nas*). Let me explain how Nanautvi brought together these two points to assemble the case that, contrary to Sayyid Ahmad

[71]Ibid.

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Khan's contention that 'all words and actions that emanated from the Prophet were based on truth', the Prophet could indeed have uttered words that opposed truth and, most importantly, that doing so would in no way undercut his prophetic honour and pedigree (*shan-i nubuwwat*).

The kernel of Nanautvi's argument was the broader conceptual claim that the qualitative status of certain actions was contingent on the conditions in which they take place and the consequences they generate. For instance, actions like listening, seeing, and walking were not good or bad in essence. Their qualitative status, salutary or undesirable, depended on their context and consequences. While walking to the mosque to offer prayers, for instance, was a salutary act, venturing to the tavern and as a consequence becoming inebriated was obviously not.[72] Similarly, if one defined lying strictly as a form of speech or discourse that opposes reality, it was not abhorrent in and of itself, Nanautvi provocatively argued. Rather, its abhorrence or lack thereof depended on its outcome. Does an act of lying harm others or does it have any beneficial consequences attached to it? Yes, on most occasions, lying was indeed a repugnant act and was hence widely considered so, Nanautvi clarified, lest his readers were unduly scandalized. But there were exceptions to this generality. More specifically, this sentence, which I am rendering into English as two separate sentences for the reader's ease of comprehension, was critical to his argument: 'suppose [a form of] discourse opposing empirical reality is emptied of harmful consequences, or after being emptied of harm it also comes to contain some benefit as well, or it coalesces both harmful and beneficial outcomes simultaneously. In this condition, the label "a harmful lie" (*kizb-i muzir*) would cease to apply to that discourse and thus its prohibition would also be lifted (*Agar guftar-i mukhalif-i waqiʿ kisi mawqiʿ mayn khali az muzarrat ho jaey ya us ke sath baʿd-Ii khuluw az muzarrat koi manfaʿat bhi lag jaey ya donon mujtamaʿ ho jaeyn tuh phir yeh mumanaʿat jo kizb-i muzir ke liyay hay ba-hal-i khud na rahay gi*).[73] Nanautvi offered the important addendum to this principle—that in the third scenario whereby a lie contained both harmful and beneficial qualities and consequences, one must determine which quality was more dominant, and then categorize that lie accordingly as either harmful and prohibited or as beneficial and permissible (*dar surat-i taʿaruz-i manfaʿat wa muzarrat ghalaba ka iʿtibar kiya jaway ga*).[74]

What, one may ponder at this point, would be an example of a 'beneficial lie' that serves the welfare of the community? Lying during warfare (*kizb fi'l harb*) was an excellent such example where it worked to hoodwink opposing unbelievers and thus repel their moral corruption (*dafʿ-i fasad*). In fact, Nanautvi emphasized, citing the famous saying of none other than Prophet Muhammad himself, 'warfare was [another name for] hoodwinking' (*al-harb khudʿa*). He combined this saying with another well-known hadith that reads 'someone who reconciles between [warring] people is not a liar (*laysa al-kadhdhab alladhi yuslih bayn al-nas*)', meaning lying for the sake of beneficial purposes like mending human relations and thus advancing the welfare of the community was not problematic.[75] Nanautvi's larger point was this: 'whenever promoting the welfare of the community and repelling corruption [remember, among the central tasks on

[72]Ibid., p. 350.
[73]Ibid., p. 351.
[74]Ibid., p. 353.
[75]Ibid., pp. 351–352.

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the prophetic job description] become dependent on the act of lying, then such an instance of lying on the part of the Prophet should not produce any perplexity and nor does it injure his exalted status'.[76] Nanautvi concluded his analysis with a remarkably blunt statement, directly countering Sayyid Ahmad Khan's quest to curate an image of the Prophet that was above worldly faults and failings: 'Yes, prophets are not driven by worldly affectation and opportunism and yes, they don't use religion for worldly objectives but they are also people who are wise and not [obliviously] ignorant.'[77]

Very briefly, there are two aspects of this discussion that merit further scrutiny. First, notice that Nanautvi's entire argument hinges on the assumption that lying, in the meaning of an articulated discourse that opposes empirical reality, was not bad or, for that matter, good in essence, in and of itself. It is the conditions and consequences attached to it that made it good or bad. This was a remarkable and a rather counterintuitive position whereby the value and quality of an apparently repugnant act like lying was tied to its effects on its subjects and objects. And second, notice the contrast between Nanautvi's openness to exploring aspects of the Prophet's persona and mission that do not sit comfortably with his modern image as a faultless human and Khan's avid resistance to opening any discursive avenue that might blemish that image. It was the traditionalist Nanautvi who showed no qualms about making space for considerations of *realpolitik* and the community's welfare in how one understood the prophetic mandate, considerations that may also turn a seemingly abominable act like lying into a salutary one. On the other hand, it was the modernist Khan who saw any possibility of vitiating the purity of the Prophet, by attributing to him the quality of lying or the motivation of temporary worldly expedience—which was both offensive and doctrinally untenable.

Conclusion: Competing genealogies of South Asian Muslim modernity

Though I have only discussed illustrative examples from a text with several other layers of instructive discursive moves and encounters, I hope I have captured the broad lineaments of the subtle yet hugely consequential intra-Muslim division represented by the disagreement between Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Sayyid Ahmad Khan. As I stated earlier, the tone and style of this disagreement were not polemical or derisive. In fact, both Nanautvi and Khan seemed to compete with each other for the laurels of self-effacement, with Khan exaggerating humility while seeking correction of his views from the Deoband 'ulama and Nanautvi expressing ample doubt that the opinion of a 'poor powerless' scholar like himself could reach or have any effect on a towering government bureaucrat like Khan.[78] These gestures were of course coated with more than a tinge of sarcasm. But even then, the absence in their exchange of the sort of polemical fireworks that engulfed so many intra-Muslim and inter-religious contestations of late-nineteenth century South Asia is notable.[79] However, as I said earlier, the relatively less acrimonious tone of this disagreement should not lead us to undermine its significance or consequences.

[76]Ibid., p. 352.

[77]Ibid., p. 354.

[78]Ibid., pp. 323, 326.

[79]See and compare, Tareen, *Defending Muhammad*; Barton Scott, *Slandering the sacred: Blasphemy law and religious affect in colonial India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Tareen, *Perilous intimacies*.

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I have shown that on display in Nanautvi's exchange with Khan were two competing rationalities of reform in Muslim South Asia that offered contrasting prescriptions for how one must stratify the tradition to best confront the monstrous menace of colonial modernity. For Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the rupture of colonialism necessitated a rupture in tradition whereby its sources, sources of authority, and hermeneutical procedures and priorities had to be reconfigured. Otherwise, the seismic cleavage of colonial modernity was bound to smother South Asian Muslims under its unyielding edges. In contrast, Nanautvi too exhibited no qualms about benefitting from the technological potential and possibilities of the modern moment, as he amply did during the interreligious polemic of Shahjahanpur that I mentioned earlier and as part of his other reformist activities during the course of his career. Also, though not at the expense of traditionalist knowledge, Nanautvi openly encouraged his pupils to acquire proficiency in English so they might negotiate the colonial public sphere with confidence.

Again, the Khan-Nanautvi debate, and by extension the Aligarh-Deoband divide, was not a contest between the banner bearers of tradition and modernity. That said, we do nonetheless find in these two thinkers significantly diverging outlooks on how one must contend with the conditions and challenges of colonial modernity. For Nanautvi, in contrast to Khan, surviving the vicissitudes of colonial modernity required not jettisoning or indelibly transforming, but rather more vigorously reasserting and re-emphasizing traditionalist conceptions and protocols of knowledge regimes and transmission. In contrast, in Khan's view, there was no other way to manage and repel the encroaching spectre and presence of modern colonial power but through a thorough refurbishment of the architecture of tradition. Let me sum up this point in different words. The normative world view of a traditionalist scholar like Nanautvi hinged on a non-negotiable display of fidelity to the key epistemological principles, hierarchies, and priorities of the Islamic legal tradition which, though open to interpretive elasticity, were nonetheless never available for irreversible reordering. For a Muslim modernist like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, on the other hand, while the legal canon was certainly sacrosanct, the hermeneutical fidelity it demanded was neither imperative nor non-negotiable.

This underlying epistemic division, I should briefly note in closing, is not simply a matter of interpretive gymnastics and doxological hair-splitting. Rather, it holds profound and far-reaching implications for a range of ethical questions, most prominently that of how one imagines the limits of Muslim/non-Muslim relations and friendship in modernity, for at its heart lies the problem of how one ought to guard the self and tradition from the threat of difference and innovation during a moment of unprecedented transformation. So, for instance, while writing in his famous journal *Polishing Ethics* (*Tahzib al-Akhlaq*), Sayyid Ahmad Khan had brushed aside the normative usefulness or applicability of the doctrine of the reprehensible imitation of non-Muslims (*tashabbuh*), precisely through the application of his overarching principle that '*once a Muslim believed in God and in the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, it was impossible for him to be faulted for unbelief*'.

In the modern world, once a Muslim fulfilled the minimum requirement of affirming faith in God and in the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, matters like imitating the habits, customs, or dress of non-Muslims bore no normative or salvational consequences, Khan had argued. He had also questioned the authenticity of the

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Prophet's saying or hadith 'whoever imitates a people becomes one of them' from which this doctrine of the reprehensible imitation of non-Muslims is derived.[80] The most rigorous and vigorous rebuttal of Khan's minimalist position on the normativity of Islam and Muslim identity in relation to Muslim/non-Muslim relations was penned by none other than Qasim Nanautvi's grandson and later pre-eminent Deoband scholar in his own right Muhammad Tayyib al-Qasimi, more popularly known as Qari Muhammad Tayyib (d. 1983). In a finely grained yet ferociously strident Urdu text called *Reprehensible Imitation in Islam* (*Al-Tashabbuh fi'l Islam*) composed in 1929, Tayyib had taken Sayyid Ahmad Khan to task for camouflaging and thus undermining Muslim distinction from non-Muslims in the performance of religious and everyday life.[81] For Tayyib, as indeed for many South Asian 'ulama in colonial South Asia across the ideological spectrum, in a world beset by the absence of Muslim political sovereignty, it was precisely in the practice of everyday ritual life that the promise of Muslim sovereign power was enshrined.[82] Though the tone of Tayyib's discourse, which was among his earliest texts,[83] was significantly more biting than that of his grandfather Nanautvi, the central philosophical assumption that animated their positions was remarkably similar. That assumption was this: the epistemological disfigurement of the tradition, its sources, and its protocols of interpretation lead to the ontological disfigurement of the individual Muslim subject and community. For both traditionalists like Nanautvi and Tayyib as well as for a modernist like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, knowledge, hermeneutics, and politics were ineluctably entwined. But the texture of this entwinement found in their thought and in the rationalities and consequences of their respective reform projects differed markedly.

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[80] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (Lahore: Tajiran-i Kutub-i Qawmi, n.d.), pp. 114–117.

[81] Muhammad Tayyib al-Qasimi, *Al-Tashabbuh fiʾl Islam* (Deoband: Matbaʿ Qasimi, 1929), pp. 15–86. For a detailed reading of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's views on *tashabbuh* (the reprehensible imitation of non-Muslims) and Qari Tayyib's refutation of those views, see Tareen, *Perilous intimacies*, pp. 231–252.

[82] See Tareen, *Perilous intimacies* for an elaboration of this argument.

[83] Which he wrote at the age of 32.

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