

The Evolution of Qur'anic Hermeneutics in British India, 1857-1947
Projects, Ideas, and Trends

by

Kamran Bashir

MBA, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, 1994

Diploma in Arabic Language, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, 2010

MA in Muslim Cultures, The Aga Khan University (AKU-ISMC), London, England, 2012

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Department of History

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Supervisory Committee

Professor Neilesh Bose, Department of History

Co-Supervisor

Professor Derryl N. Maclean, Department of History, Simon Fraser University

Co-Supervisor

Professor Gregory Blue, Department of History

Departmental Member

Professor Marcus Milwright, Department of History in Art

Outside Member

Abstract

Histories of *tafsīr* in South Asia have been mainly focused on identifying extant works of Qur’anic scholarship in the region. There are only a few academic works that explore the primary sources in detail. Surveys of the present state of the study of modern Qur’anic commentaries also highlight the lacunae in our knowledge of regional *tafsīr* and Qur’anic hermeneutics. Focusing on Urdu and Arabic works, the current study as a work of intellectual history is the first systematic attempt to open a new area of inquiry. Building on the earlier historiography of the pre-modern *tafsīr* in South Asia, it charts the development of Qur’anic hermeneutics in British India by focusing on the works of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), Ashraf °Alī Thānawī (d. 1943), and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930), along with larger exegetical literature that emerged in North India. Looking beyond the artificial dichotomy of modernity and tradition and of reform and revivalism, as forces making an impact on Muslim Qur’anic thought, the current study focuses on two questions. What were the continuities and shifts in Qur’anic hermeneutics in British India since the latter half of the nineteenth century? Why did Qur’anic hermeneutics evolve the way it did in the multiple milieux of colonial India? The thesis also investigates an ancillary question: In developing their positions on Qur’anic hermeneutics, how did Muslim scholars in the period under examination conceive their relationship with the Muslim intellectual tradition in terms of their continuity or discontinuity? The study demonstrates the impact of historical forces and Muslim creative thinking on the development of modern Qur’anic hermeneutics in South Asia. Disagreeing on some key points with the current scholarship on modern Qur’an commentaries and Muslim scholarship in British India, the study shows that the period witnessed to the rise of new approaches to the study of the Qur’an in addition to the continuation of earlier trends. Moreover, it shows that Muslim scholarly ideas on

the nature of the Muslim intellectual tradition in general, including Qur'anic exegesis, had a decisive impact on the development of thinking about the Qur'an in this period.

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Transliteration System Used for Arabic and Urdu

I have used the following table of transliteration recommended by the journal *Islamic Studies* published by the Institute of Islamic Research, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan. It can be accessed from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/26393684>.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE															
ا	a	د	d	غ	gh	بھ	bh	Long Vowels							
ب	b	ذ	dh	ف	f	پھ	ph	آ	ā						
پ	p	ر	r	ق	q	تھ	th	ی	ī						
ت	t	ڑ	r̄	ک	k	ٹھ	ṭh	و	ū						
ٹ	ṭ	ز	z	گ	g	چھ	jh	و (Urdu)	ō						
ث	th	ژ	z̄	ل	l	چھ	ch	ے (Urdu)	ē						
ج	j	س	s	م	m	دھ	dh	Short Vowels							
چ	ch	ش	sh	ن	n	دھ	ḍh	ا	a						
ح	ḥ	ص	ṣ	ں	ṅ	ڑھ	r̄h	ی	i						
خ	kh	ط	ṭ	ہ	h	کھ	kh	و	u						
د	d	ظ	ẓ	ی	y	گھ	gh	Diphthongs							
<p>أ (ع), when it appears at the middle or end of a word, is transliterated as elevated comma (') followed by the letter representing the vowel it carries. However, when أ appears at the beginning of a word it will be represented only by the letter representing the vowel it carries.</p> <p>ع is transliterated as elevated inverted comma (').</p> <p>ض as an Arabic letter is transliterated as (d), and as a Persian/Turkish/Urdu letter as (z).</p> <p>و as an Arabic letter is transliterated as (w), and as a Persian/Turkish/Urdu letter is transliterated as (v).</p> <p>آ is transliterated as (ah) in pause form and as (at) in construct form.</p> <p>Article ال is transliterated as (al-) whether followed by a moon or a sun letter, however, in construct form it will be transliterated as (l).</p> <p>و as a Persian/Urdu conjunction is transliterated as (-o) whereas as an Arabic conjunction و is transliterated as (wa).</p> <p>Short vowel (َ) in Persian/Urdu possessive or adjectival form is transliterated as (-i).</p>								و	<table border="1"> <tr><td>(Arabic)</td><td>w</td></tr> <tr><td>(Persian/Urdu)</td><td>au</td></tr> <tr><td>(Turkish)</td><td>ev</td></tr> </table>	(Arabic)	w	(Persian/Urdu)	au	(Turkish)	ev
								(Arabic)	w						
(Persian/Urdu)	au														
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ی	<table border="1"> <tr><td>(Arabic)</td><td>ay</td></tr> <tr><td>(Persian/Urdu)</td><td>ai</td></tr> <tr><td>(Turkish)</td><td>ey</td></tr> </table>	(Arabic)	ay	(Persian/Urdu)	ai	(Turkish)	ey								
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<p>Doubled</p>								و	<table border="1"> <tr><td>(Arabic)</td><td>uww</td></tr> <tr><td>(Persian)</td><td>uvv</td></tr> <tr><td>(Urdu)</td><td>uvv</td></tr> </table>	(Arabic)	uww	(Persian)	uvv	(Urdu)	uvv
								(Arabic)	uww						
(Persian)	uvv														
(Urdu)	uvv														
ی	<table border="1"> <tr><td>(Arabic)</td><td>iyy</td></tr> </table>	(Arabic)	iyy												
(Arabic)	iyy														

Exceptions / Additions to the above Transliteration Guide

1. Where Arabic letters are similar to Urdu letters, I have used the Arabic transliteration system to avoid complications. For instance, for ض, I have used “ḍ” and “Ḍ” for both Arabic and Urdu. Same is the case with و, for which I have used “w”.
2. In the case where there is no problem of reversibility either in Arabic or Urdu, I follow one practice. For instance, instead of “Khairābādī” in Urdu contexts, I use “Khayrābādī.”
3. For ة (*tāʾ e marbūṭa*) in the end, I use “a” and not “ah”.
4. For the use of ل, I have avoided using (ʾl) format. For instance, instead of “Abūʾl Kalām,” I have used “Abū al-Kalām.”
5. When ة (*hamzah*) represents the connective syllable joining a *mudāf* to what follows, it is romanized -yi. For example, *malika-yi inglistān* for ملکہ انگلستان.

Acknowledgments

The foremost debt, I feel, I owe to Professor Andrew Rippin with whom I had started the project in 2012 and developed it further until his passing away in November 2016. It was indeed a personal loss to me as I fondly cherish the memory of my association with him.

On the personal front, the biggest debt I owe is to my wife, Huda, who is always there to support me and cheer me up with her wonderful presence. I feel gratitude for her patience and love all along the way. My sons, Haadi and Hasnayn, have made my life delightful with their loving presence. My mom was back home and her prayers always did the magic in hidden ways.

I have to acknowledge the unfailing support of Professor Derryl Maclean who steered my whole project after Professor Rippin and guided me all the way. More than a supervisor, he has been a wonderful scholar and person to know ever since I studied with him at Simon Fraser University.

In the department of history, there are many who have helped me in a number of ways. Professor Gregory Blue has been a source of personal inspiration for me over the years. Undergoing training with him in historiography and engaging in long discussions on the larger domains of the humanities and social sciences were unforgettable experiences.

I owe gratitude to Professor Neilesh Bose for his continuous support, and it was wonderful knowing him and exchanging ideas on South Asian history. I am also thankful to Professor Marcus Milwright for his immensely valuable inputs to my project.

A host of names quickly emerge in my mind when I think of the departmental support. Professors John Lutz, Lynne Marks, Perry Biddiscombe, and Sara Beam have immensely supported my studies and project. I will always miss them. I would also like to thank Heather Waterlander for her continuous support throughout my program.

How can I miss Professor Martin Bunton who was always there to help and support, and engage in intellectual discussions on the history of the Middle East.

My long association with the late Dr. Patricia Crone was instrumental in enabling me to switch to academia from the corporate world and pursue graduate research in history. She always inspired me in conceiving new ways of understanding the world of late antiquity.

Dedication

To the loving memory of my Dad

Introduction

Writing some time around the turn of the twentieth century, Shiblī Nu[°]mānī (d. 1914), a renowned Muslim theologian and historian in colonial India and one of the founders of the famous religious seminary in Lucknow, Nadwat al-[°]Ulamā[°], was reviewing the origins of Muslim exegetical activity.¹ What he commented about the ascribed authors of the earliest of Qur’an commentaries (singular: *tafsīr*; plural: *tafāsīr*) captured the very pulse of Muslim intellectual thinking regarding the Qur’an that had been evolving for more than a century in South Asia. Nu[°]mānī subjected to severe criticism, for their being unreliable, such established and well-received figures in the Muslim exegetical tradition as Mujāhid bin Jabr (d. 720), al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 723), al-Suddī (d. 745), Ibn Kalbī (d. 763), and Muqātil bin Sulaymān (d. 767). He commented:

It may not be appropriate to unfold the activities of these “great” personalities here in passing, but that was the least reward due to them for the serious harm they have caused to Islam. These are the people whose traditions and reports fill the pages of [al-Rāzī’s] *Tafsīr-i Kabīr*, [al-Zamakhsharī’s] *al-Kashshāf*, al-Bayḍāwī,² and thousands of others. Love for wonders, superstitions, and wrong opinions, which have become a special feature of Muslim life, stem from the traditions and reports of these persons.³

¹ For his biography, see Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *Ḥayāt-i Shiblī* (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifīn, 1993).

² These are references to the notable pre-modern Qur’an commentaries in Arabic by Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), and Nāsir al-Dīn [°]Abd Allāh ibn [°]Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286).

³ Shiblī Nu[°]mānī, “[°]Ulūm al-Qur[°]ān,” in *Maqālāt-i Shiblī*, ed. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, vol. 1 (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifīn, 1999), 33. Unless cited otherwise, all translations in the dissertation from Arabic and Urdu are mine. The square brackets in the translations are my interventions; the parentheses are from the original texts. The English translations of Qur’an verses used in this dissertation are from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The choice of the translation is driven by the translator’s recognition of the complexity involved in rendering the Arabic style and diction of the Qur’an into another language.

What led a traditionally educated scholar like Nu^ḥmānī to make such an analysis was, in fact, the outcome of more than a century of evolution of Muslim thought on interpreting the Qur'an. It was also a product of the interplay of social, intellectual, and political forces at work in colonial India since the late eighteenth century.

Nu^ḥmānī's assessment of the early moments of writing Qur'anic exegesis in the Muslim intellectual tradition hinted at another important underlying question that was lying at the heart of evolving Muslim religious thought in colonial India. The question was how Muslim scholars in colonial India understood the nature of the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis in particular, and the Muslim intellectual tradition in general.⁴ In other words, dismissing some of the established figures in this tradition would apparently mean encouraging revisiting the very processes through which this tradition had accumulated. It hinted at the problem of how one could posit a continuity with the Muslim intellectual past if the foundations of the Muslim tradition were perceived as untrustworthy.

Nu^ḥmānī's analysis opens for us the fascinating, yet hitherto under-studied, world of Qur'anic scholarship in South Asia. As a work of intellectual history, the current study is the first systematic attempt to investigate the nature of Qur'anic thought in the region. It is important to note that the dissertation has a primary focus of research along with an ancillary area of investigation. Primarily, it concentrates on the evolution of modern Muslim thought on Qur'anic hermeneutics in South Asia between 1857 and 1947 (see the section on methodology below for

⁴ I use the term "tradition" in this dissertation to mean Muslim scholarly or intellectual tradition in terms of the accumulation and transmission of works such as on Qur'anic exegesis, Ḥadīth, Islamic law, theology, and philosophy from early to later centuries. The focus will be on how individual Muslim scholars and their groups in colonial India viewed their relationship with the intellectual tradition as betrayed in their writings on the Qur'an and other topics. This relationship was also based on how they understood the Muslim tradition in terms of its unity or plurality, and its historical development.

more details). Building on this primary investigation, the dissertation also studies the evolving nature of Muslim scholarship in British India. It investigates how Muslim scholars were thinking about their relationship with the past Muslim intellectual tradition in terms of continuity or discontinuity with it, and how Muslim scholars viewed and assessed this centuries-long heritage. As will be discussed later below, this ancillary question reveals how modern Muslim scholars and their works from the latter half of the nineteenth century came to be understood and conceptualized in the secular academic study of modern Islam.

In addition to examining the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics in South Asia, the dissertation offers two original studies in Chapters One and Two that form the necessary background for the subsequent chapters. Chapter One attempts to develop a sense of Qur'anic hermeneutics in the region from pre-modern times till 1857, along with the first detailed literature review of earlier histories of *tafsīr* literature in South Asia. Breaking the somewhat academic silence on pre-modern and early modern Qur'anic thought in South Asia, the chapter paves the way for future studies on the subject. Chapter Two identifies the intellectual and institutional contexts in colonial India in which Muslim scholarly thought on the Qur'an was taking shape from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. For a historian, this chapter helps, by investigating beyond the oft-repeated colonial contexts of reform and revivalism, in answering the question of why this regional Qur'anic thought evolved in the way it did.

Before I outline the methodology of the current study, a review of the available literature on Qur'anic interpretation in South Asia can be helpful for later analysis. There are three types of works available in which the questions addressed in this dissertation have been studied earlier, in a limited way though. First, there has been a steady growth of histories that map the extent of

exegetical activity that continued over the centuries since the arrival of the Arabs in India. This literature will be one of the focal points of Chapter One. Second, there are a few works devoted to individual Muslim scholars, such as Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), of the modern period that discuss their exegetical contributions at some length or study their Qur’anic thought as part of their larger religious thought. In order to use these works effectively for the current study, I discuss such limited number of works in the subsequent chapters on individual exegetes (see section on methodology below). Third, there are academic works that have focused on the study of the characteristics of modern Qur’an commentaries and Qur’anic hermeneutics in comparison to the pre-modern⁵ *tafsīr*. In these studies, the focus has been to map the development of modern Qur’anic hermeneutics in the Muslim world, including South Asia, from the late eighteenth century onwards, which is generally assumed in the discourses on modern Islam as the beginnings of the modern period.⁶ In the following section, this literature will be reviewed.

Academic works centred around the larger study of the nature of the modern *tafsīr* draw upon a limited number of Qur’an commentaries written in the Indian subcontinent and in other

⁵ For the purposes of this current study, the term “pre-modern *tafsīr*” stands for pre-nineteenth century Qur’an commentaries, written mostly in Arabic. In the academic study of the history of the interpretation of the Qur’an, periodizations of *tafsīr* works, such as classical, post-classical, medieval, and early modern, are controversial, particularly in terms of continuities and shifts in *tafsīr* genre, and in terms of reception of individual *tafsīr* works. What is meant by “classical” *tafsīr* is difficult to determine if we want to base this definition on the widespread reception of a particular text or texts. Even the status of the tenth-century commentary by Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) is contested, which now holds a special place in the historiography of Arabic *tafsīr*. For Ignaz Goldziher, author of the first systematic study of the history of *tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī was the chief architect of the genre. However, Walid Saleh has challenged this long prevailing idea in his work on the influence and reception of early Qur’an commentaries. See Walid A. Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition: The Qur’ān Commentary of Al-Tha‘labī (d. 427/1035)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004). Andrew Rippin proposed another periodization to think about the evolution of the pre-modern *tafsīr* which is: formative, classical, and mature periods. Andrew Rippin, “Tafsīr,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al, 2nd ed., accessed December 29, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_7294. Both Rippin and Saleh suggest this *tafsīr* tradition as a genealogical tradition in which exegetes had been building on previous works in their own ways.

⁶ Here I have used the word “modern” to refer to a particular historical period, and not to an epithet alluding to the character of modernity.

geographical regions of the Muslim world. The first treatise that initiated the study of modern commentaries was the 1920 volume of the Hungarian Islamicist, Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921).⁷ Around his time, other scholars⁸ in Europe and the British Empire had also started recognizing new Muslim methods in South Asia to interpret the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet⁹ as constituting what Goldziher characterised as "Islamic Modernism." Goldziher devoted a separate chapter in his work to the first somewhat sophisticated analysis of new trends in Qur'an commentaries in contrast to the pre-modern genre. Highlighting only briefly the Indian attempts in the works of Sayyid Amīr °Alī (d. 1928), Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), and Mirzā Abū al-Faḍl (d. 1956), he focused instead on the school of Muḥammad °Abdūh (d. 1905) in Egypt and his incomplete Qur'an commentary, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, which appeared in the famous Arabic journal, *al-Manār*.

After Goldziher, the study of the modern *tafsīr* in the academy has passed through a few key intellectual milestones. These landmarks seem to converge on certain common points in their analysis and present us with a somewhat shared narrative of the development of modern Muslim engagements with the Qur'an, despite certain minor disagreements.¹⁰ There are three

⁷ Ignaz Goldziher, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 197-232. The original German edition appeared under the title *Die Richtungen Der Islamischen Koranauslegung* in 1920.

⁸ See S.M. Zwemer, review of *The Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation, Arranged Chronologically with an Abstract*, 2 vols., by Mirzā Abū al-Faḍl, *The Moslem World* 2, no. 1 (January 1912): 82-84, <http://doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.1912.tb00120.x>; Theodor Nöldeke, review of *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, by Syed Ameer Ali, *The Academy* 4, no. 73 (June 1873): 207-209, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/8172509/95A47C55C52C4084PQ/3?accountid=14846>.

⁹ The interpretation of the Qur'an is often linked to a certain assessment and identification of different phases of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. Therefore, European writings on the life of the Prophet often took into their purview the interpretation of the Qur'an as well.

¹⁰ In addition to Goldziher, the following works encapsulate the main features of the modern *tafsīr* as discussed in this section on literature review: J.M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation, 1880-1960* (Leiden: Brill, 1961); J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Routraud Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed December 23, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00059; Johanna Pink, "Tradition, Authority and Innovation in Contemporary Sunnī *tafsīr*."

factors, which can be articulated in the form of questions, that have shaped this intellectual history written in the academy. Different observers have attempted to answer these questions distinctively in the light of their own analysis of the modern *tafsīr*. First, how did the larger *historical context* in different Muslim societies compel Muslim exegetes and thinkers to revisit older modes of interpretation of the Islamic scripture? Second, what are the *methods of study* that can better grasp the exact state of this modern genre of religious writing? And finally, what are the *categories* into which we can arguably classify different commentaries written in the languages of the Muslim world? In the following pages, I elaborate how these questions have influenced academic thinking about the nature of modern Qur'an commentaries and the hermeneutics involved.

The question of the larger context has attracted attention since the time of Goldziher who simply considered these commentaries a product of the age of Islamic modernism which, in its essence, was a response to the challenges posed by the European scientific ideas and the worldviews promoted by the Enlightenment and its aftermath. Giving the impression of their European intellectual superiority, Goldziher and other European readers appreciated these modern Muslim works as either timely, though flawed, attempts at coming to grips with

Towards a Typology of Qur'an Commentaries from the Arab World, Indonesia and Turkey," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (October 2010): 56-82; Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2011); Johanna Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr in der modernen islamischen Welt: Akademische Traditionen, Popularisierung und nationalstaatliche Interessen* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010); Johanna Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke, accessed December 23, 2017, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199696703.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199696703-e-013>; Andreas Görke and Johanna Pink, eds., *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Boundaries of a Genre* (London: Oxford University Press & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014); Suha Taji-Farouki, ed., *The Qur'an and its Readers Worldwide: Contemporary Commentaries and Translations* (London: Oxford University Press & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015). Some articles related to modern Qur'an commentaries can be seen in the anthology of previously published articles, Mustafa Shah, ed., *Tafsir: Interpreting the Qur'an*, 4 vols. (London & New York: Routledge: 2013).

emerging modernity, or as the products of Muslim apologetics, that is, Muslim responses to explain Islam and its foundational texts in the face of non-Muslim criticism.¹¹ As Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), a renowned German Semitist and the author of the seminal work in modern Western Qur'anic studies, *Geschichte des Qorans*, wrote while reviewing a recent biography of the Prophet by a notable Muslim author, Sayyid Amīr °Alī:

In conclusion we would rather insist again on the pleasure with which we hail in the author a warm and sincere advocate of humane ideas. Though we cannot share his opinion that Mohammed's teaching agrees with the highest demands of humanity, it is eminently satisfactory that he should choose such a standard to test his religion by.¹²

In addition to the Western influence, it was, as historians of the modern *tafsīr* argued, the larger context of Muslim reformist and revivalist currents since the middle of the eighteenth century, in the wake of a perceived Muslim decline, that decisively shaped Muslim scholarship in its thinking about the Qur'an. In other words, it was the preoccupation with the reform of the political and social order that made the Muslim intelligentsia revisit the interpretation of the Qur'an and make it the centre around which they could weave their reformist threads.¹³

In addition to identifying the larger context, another challenging task for investigators of the modern *tafsīr* has been the search for appropriate methods of studying a modern Qur'an commentary that can enable them to identify some common characteristics of this ever-expanding corpus. In the earlier studies of modern *tafsīr* literature, writers such as Goldziher and J.M.S. Baljon focused on specific themes that were dealt with by Muslim authors in their commentaries. One characteristic method of study was to focus on theological matters in the

¹¹ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 121.

¹² Nöldeke, review of *Critical Examination of the Life*, 209.

¹³ See Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis," Campanini, *Modern Muslim Interpretations*, 1-7.

Qur'an and identify how individual modern commentators dealt with these issues in comparison to pre-modern exegetes.¹⁴ Theological issues in such studies included, among other themes, the idea of the nature of God or the question of free will. Other themes emerged from political, social, and intellectual issues such as the Qur'anic view of *jihād*, the role of women in society, the compatibility or incompatibility of the Qur'an with science, and the weight one should give to rational thinking while interpreting the scripture. Investigators have normally been interested in identifying different positions of individual modern exegetes on these issues. Building on their study of particular themes, investigators have claimed to discern hidden worldviews held by the exegetes. Goldziher considered recent Indian readings of the Qur'an, represented in the works of Aḥmad Khān and Amīr °Alī, as a cultural movement, apologetic in tone, which interpreted the Qur'an as part of a larger movement of social reform; whereas, the school of °Abdūh based its reformist agenda on theological considerations. In °Abdūh, as Goldziher argued, the history of mankind was passing through a predetermined course governed by the divine will.¹⁵

On this question of methods for studying *tafsīr* literature, scholars have also attempted to recognize changes in *uṣūl al-tafsīr* ("principles of interpretation") by comparing and contrasting pre-modern and modern works.¹⁶ In these comparative studies, there is a tendency to see the use of ḥadīths, that is, sayings or traditions attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, as declining in the modern *tafsīr*. The trends that are seen on the rise include giving more weight to the literal meaning of the Qur'an and the opinions of early Muslims as recorded by the Muslim exegetical

¹⁴ See Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 54-81; Jansen, *Interpretation of the Koran*, 35-54; Pink, "Tradition, Authority and Innovation"; Pink, *Sunnitische Tafsīr*, chap. 3. I am grateful to Zsofia Surjan (Department of History, University of Victoria) for her help with the German sources.

¹⁵ Goldziher, *Schools of Koran Commentators*, 220.

¹⁶ See Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis."

tradition. Moreover, far greater stress can be discerned, as compared to the pre-modern exegesis, on emphasizing the literary qualities of the Qur'an – an apparent consequence of non-Muslim criticism on the nature and style of the Qur'an (a topic dealt with in Chapter Two). It has been noted that in modern commentaries the Qur'an is understood more and more as a well-structured work in which whole suras ("chapters") or passages are read as meaningful coherent units.

Focusing both on themes and *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, Baljon's work, which he presented as an extension of Goldziher's, is the only one that focused especially on selected works written in colonial India. He also devoted a separate chapter to the study of interpretive principles.¹⁷ However, Baljon seemed to be most interested in discovering modernism or apparently radical breaks in the exegetical literature of the modern period as compared to pre-modern works. For him, the modern *tafsīr* depicts a repugnance towards using extra-Qur'anic stories to interpret the scripture and places more stress on reason and demythologizing the scripture. He concentrated more on the end results of an individual exegete's treatment of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses than on his specific methodology of interpretation. Neither was he interested in reading these texts in the historical context of the period nor within the larger intellectual thought of individual commentators. Moreover, his selection of exegetical works, which were otherwise interesting and creative, was limited and did not represent the mainstream works that influenced the hermeneutical thinking of Muslim scholarship in British India. Some works that he chose came from less-known authors and others originated in the post-1947 period, that is beyond the scope of the current dissertation.¹⁸

¹⁷ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 16-36.

¹⁸ I use the expression "post-colonial period" to mean the post-independence period manifested in the creation of the states of India and Pakistan, and not suggesting other ideas attached with the term such as the continuation of colonial heritage.

Regarding the third question of how to categorize different works of the modern *tafsīr*, the study of larger historical contexts and the use of methods to identify principles of interpretation have interacted to give birth to various approaches categorizable under labels such as: *tafsīr musalsal* (“continuous exegesis”); *tafsīr nuzūlī* (“chronological exegesis”); *tafsīr* on the selected passages of the Qur’an; *mushkilāt al-Qur’ān* (“difficult terms and passages of the Qur’an”); *tafsīr mawḍū‘ī* (“thematic exegesis”); *tafsīr ‘ilmī* (“scientific exegesis based on the Qur’an’s anticipation of the findings of modern science”); commentaries based on the modern varieties of *ī‘jāz* (“Qur’an’s inimitability”); commentaries that tend to take account of the historicity of the Qur’an; and commentaries seeking new immediacy in the Qur’an in terms of reading it as a relevant text in modern times.¹⁹

Based on her extensive study of Qur’an commentaries and the history of their categorizations, Johanna Pink, a leading voice on the modern *tafsīr* and Qur’anic hermeneutics, has come up with some new experiments in *tafsīr* categorizations, in addition to those mentioned above.²⁰ She classifies these works in two ways: according to the purpose of a commentary or its underlying ethos; or according to its particular interpretive positions. The former category comprises three types of works: scholars’ commentaries for specialists; institutional commentaries as part of the execution of state agendas; popularising commentaries for public consumption. The latter set of commentaries are divided into: conservative commentaries; moderately orthodox commentaries incorporating some reformist materials; and modernist commentaries inclined more towards reformism. Pink observes regional tendencies among

¹⁹ For the discussion of these categories, see Wielandt, “Exegesis of the Qur’an.”

²⁰ See Pink, “Tradition, Authority and Innovation;” Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr*, 51-124.

commentaries as well. Arab commentaries are found to be more conservative, while Indonesian and Turkish commentaries are more reformist in content.

While the discourse on modern Qur'an commentaries, as reviewed above, brings to light many important features of this creative genre with its large corpus of writings, it also carries with it certain assumptions and limitations that impede our understanding of this ever-expanding body of literature. To begin with, the major challenge that a scholar faces when attempting to make sense of modern *tafsīr* literature is its enormous size in terms of linguistic and geographical variety, which have grown exponentially ever since print technology became popular in the Muslim world. Therefore, charting the development of hermeneutical ideas about the Qur'an is a limited exercise if we rely merely on one *tafsīr* such as of °Abdūh, or just on Arabic works, or some selected literature in other languages. In addition, in methodological terms, it is the very relationship of the pre-modern *tafsīr* with the modern one that is either underestimated in studies until now, or that is recognized only nominally. In the decade or so since Routraud Wielandt's seminal article on the early modern and modern exegesis in the *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān*,²¹ investigators customarily acknowledge that it is difficult to mark the boundaries of pre-modern and modern Qur'an commentaries in terms of their differences in interpretive methods. Yet it is surprising that many of these intellectual historians take modernity and Muslim reform movements as the underlying forces that have *decisively* shaped the genre since the middle of the eighteenth century, without dealing in any way with the question of how far or in what ways the modern *tafsīr* is influenced or shaped by the pre-modern exegetical tradition. Only very recently has this dichotomy of "modernity" and "tradition" been

²¹ Wielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'ān."

seen as problematic to some extent.²² However, the forces of Muslim reform and revivalism are still seen as influencing modern commentaries universally. The result of this approach is a near-universal perception of an eclipsing of the role of the pre-modern *tafsīr* in the modern genre despite the nominal acknowledgment of the former's influence on the latter.

Moreover, our understanding of the modern *tafsīr* seems to rest on certain assumptions about the nature of pre-modern commentaries. By subscribing to certain judgments that, in fact, reify the form and content of this pre-modern literature, observers in the academy are prone to perceive concrete shifts in the modern genre of Qur'anic interpretation. Take, for instance, the case of the assumption of the predominance of "literal meaning" or "obvious meaning" in the modern Qur'an commentary.²³ By contrast, the pre-modern *tafsīr* is understood as laying less stress on the literal meaning of Qur'anic verses. But there are two clear problems with this. First, it is difficult to define what we mean by literal meaning. Does literal meaning exist outside the semantical range provided by the scholarly tradition of pre-modern Qur'an commentaries, the Arabic lexicon, and other literary sources? On many occasions, a literal meaning, chosen by a modern commentator, of a Qur'anic verse can already be a part of the pre-modern heritage of exegesis. Therefore, this stress on literal meaning cannot readily be construed as a break from the past. Second, even if we avoid the scholarly debate initiated by Walid Saleh on the nature of the pre-modern *tafsīr*,²⁴ it is difficult to claim that this early genre was devoid of any emphasis

²² Görke and Pink, eds., *Tafsīr and Islamic Intellectual History*, 1-26.

²³ Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis," 3.

²⁴ Walid Saleh argues that the emphasis on exegetical ḥadīths in the pre-modern *tafsīr* is a phenomenon that owed its origins to the Damascene Muslim scholar, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), and that the *tafsīr* in the Muslim world had been mostly scholastic and semantically polyvalent in nature, that is, more on the lines of al-Bayḍāwī's until the rise of Salafism in the Muslim world. See Walid A. Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of *An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'anic Exegesis*," in *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times*, eds. Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 123-162; Walid A. Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 12, no. 1-2 (October 2010): 6-40.

on the apparent or literal meaning of the verses. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to establish something concrete about the nature of the pre-modern commentary, a recent work by Robert Gleave points to the complexity of the issue that has a bearing on our study of the modern Qur'an commentary as well. Gleave analyzes how literal and non-literal meanings both played a role in pre-modern commentaries, and for this he brings evidence from the early exegetical works of Mujāhid bin Jabr (d. 720) and Zayd bin ʿAlī (d. 740).²⁵ What needs to be stressed here, through this one example, is that certain fixed opinions about the pre-modern *tafsīr* and its hermeneutical principles can hamper our understanding of the modern genre too. In order to further illustrate the complexity of the pre-modern genre for its comparison with modern commentaries, we can take the question of *asbāb al-nuzūl* (“occasions of revelation”; Urdu: *shān-i nuzūl*)²⁶ as another example that can highlight the nature of assumptions that observers of the modern *tafsīr* carry with them about pre-modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Pre-modern Qur'an commentaries are generally understood as employing *asbāb* materials without caution; by contrast, the prevailing perception is that this trend obviously changed in the modern period. The oft-cited case of the eighteenth-century Delhi polymath, Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1762) is routinely analyzed in such studies as an example of an obvious disparaging of *asbāb* material.²⁷ This assumption is problematic on several counts. The very understanding of what is meant by *asbāb* seems to have been a controversial issue in the Muslim scholarly tradition down

²⁵ Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 75-76.

²⁶ Andrew Rippin explains that by *asbāb al-nuzūl*, “we mean reports, transmitted generally from the Companions of Muḥammad, detailing the cause, time and place of the revelation of a portion (usually a verse) of the Qur'ān”. Andrew Rippin, “Occasions of Revelation,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed November 24, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00305. Also see Andrew Rippin, “The Exegetical Genre *asbāb al-nuzūl*: A Bibliographical and Terminological Survey,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48, no. 1 (February 1985): 1-15; Andrew Rippin, “The Function of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Qur'ānic exegesis,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 1 (February 1988): 1-20.

²⁷ Pink, “Striving for a New Exegesis,” 3-6.

to the present day. Therefore, if Walī Allāh was apparently seen as rethinking the meaning and importance of *asbāb* in the interpretation of the Qur’an, it is difficult to consider his thinking as marking a necessary shift toward the modern interpretation of the scripture. This is because of two reasons. First, Walī Allāh was engaged with a long tradition of understanding the nature of *asbāb al-nuzūl*, voices of which can be seen in pre-modern *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (“traditional disciplines of the Qur’anic sciences”) works²⁸ such as in al-Zarkashī’s *Al-Burhān* and al-Suyūṭī’s *Al-Itqān*. Al-Zarkashī wrote:

It is known as the common practice of the Companions and their Successors that when one of them says that the verse was revealed about a given matter (*nazalat hādhih al-āya fī kadhā*), he means that the verse encompasses [or deals with] that matter or injunction; not that the matter was the reason of its revelation.²⁹

Al-Zarkashī’s statement makes it clear that the very definition of what is meant by a *sabab* was a controversial issue in the Muslim tradition of his day. Second, the modern somewhat “established opinion” in the academy that Walī Allāh considered *asbāb* as having no or less value for *tafsīr* is in itself a disputed matter.³⁰ This dispute throws light on how an early scholar, such as Walī Allāh, was received and interpreted in later times. The issue of multiple interpretations of Walī Allāh can be seen in the instance when one of the most notable scholars

²⁸ For an introduction to the development of the Muslim sciences based on the Qur’an, see Claude Gilliot, “Traditional Disciplines of Qur’anic Studies, in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed on February 3, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00207>. The discussions on *asbāb al-nuzūl* form an important part of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* works.

²⁹ Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Zarkashī, *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 33.

³⁰ Walī Allāh discussed his position on *asbāb* material in one of his seminal Persian tract that dealt with principles of interpreting the Qur’an. Translations of the text in Arabic and Urdu seemed to become more popular with the passage of time in South Asia. The Arabic translation used in the current study is Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, trans. Sa‘īd Aḥmad al-Bālanfūrī (Damascus: Dār al-Ghawthānī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Qur’āniyya, 2008). Baljon places this work of Walī Allāh in his writings in the period after his return from the Hijaz in 1732. An earlier Arabic translation is attributed to Muḥammad Munīr al-Damishqī. Walī Allāh’s work will be discussed in detail in Chapter One. See J.M.S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī: 1703-1762* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

in the Deoband tradition of South Asia, Muḥammad Taqī °Uthmānī (b. 1943), was asked about Walī Allāh’s opinions about *asbāb*’s role in the interpretation of Qur’anic verses. Reminding us of additional aspects of Walī Allāh’s position on *asbāb*, Taqī °Uthmānī³¹ wrote the following:

The people have not understood correctly what Shāh Walī Allāh has written about *asbāb al-nuzūl* in his book, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*... The fact of the matter is that he considers *asbāb al-nuzūl* as a *pre-requisite to interpret the Qur’an* [emphasis added]. Shāh Ṣāhib himself notes: “The knowledge of two things is strictly necessary for a commentator to know. One is those events that are alluded to in the verses. We cannot understand those verses unless we know those events. The other is the fact that in some [Qur’anic] stories, the words used are too generic in nature. With the help of *shān-i nuzūl* (“occasions of revelation”), these words acquire specific meaning; or verses have sometimes an apparent (*zāhir*) meaning but *asbāb al-nuzūl* determine a different meaning. Without the knowledge of these *asbāb* traditions, it is difficult to understand Qur’anic verses.”³²

Based on the above review of the secondary literature on the modern *tafsīr*, it appears that it is the methodology for studying a particular *tafsīr* that poses the main challenge for an investigator. Whether a reader of a modern commentary focuses on one verse or a selection of verses, or he investigates the shifts in the interpretation of verses dealing with a particular theme, such a study is always a limited exercise that cannot give us a clear picture of what an exegete is actually doing in his work. In the end, limited methods of studying a voluminous commentary makes the task of mapping interpretive principles and ideas difficult. Pink chooses Q 9:111-12 in one of her articles to chart the spectrum of the modern *tafsīr*, assuming that the interpretive strategy employed in these two verses will remain the same throughout a particular commentary on the entire Qur’an.³³ In another work, she expands the canvas to select more verses around the

³¹ Here and elsewhere in the dissertation, I have occasionally used different surnames of persons for the purpose of differentiating them from others. Here I have employed “Taqī °Uthmānī” instead of “°Uthmānī” for I have used the latter surname in the dissertation for another scholar named Shabbīr Aḥmad °Uthmānī.

³² Muḥammad Taqī °Uthmānī, *°Ulūm al-Qur’ān* (1976; repr., Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-°Ulūm, 2010), 79-82. In the above quote, Taqī °Uthmānī was referring to Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, 73-74.

³³ Pink, “Tradition, Authority and Innovation.”

theme of belief (*īmān*) and believers.³⁴ But my question still persists that how far this limited analysis can enable us to make broad generalizations about a multi-volume commentary or the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics in the modern period.

In the light of the above review of the secondary literature on the modern *tafsīr*, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and the ensuing questions, I outline below the significance, methodology, and scope of the current study that focuses on the investigation of the evolution of ideas on the interpretation of the Qur'an in South Asia.

Focus and Scope of the Research

Before I deal with the issues of methodology, I should highlight the main focus of the dissertation and its historical approach. As a pioneering study, I have conceived my work as part of a larger project to which it contributes as the first systematic attempt. It is meant to pave the way for future studies on Qur'anic scholarship in South Asia. In its scope, the research in this dissertation is specifically aimed at charting continuities and shifts in Qur'anic hermeneutics, that is, principles, ideas, and trends related to the interpretation of the Qur'an. It aims neither to establish a definitive, detailed history of modern Qur'an commentaries in South Asia nor to examine what individual commentaries say on specific themes such as on gender relations, *jihād*, and other topics. Such studies might, however, build on the current work. Moreover, studying a commentary in its entirety is not the objective of this dissertation. Instead it aims to contribute to the larger field of the study of the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics by choosing to focus on South Asia. The goal is to sketch the history of modern ideas on the

³⁴ Pink discusses Q 23:1-11, Q 2:2-5, Q 33:35, Q 9:111-112, and Q 2:62 in her chapter entitled *Die Gläubigen im zeitgenössischen Korankommentar* ("believers in contemporary Qur'an commentary") in Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsīr*, 125-300.

Islamic scripture as they were evolving in the region in their multiple contexts. By rooting the investigation of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics in the contexts of British India and in the larger intellectual thought of Muslim scholars there, the dissertation strives to contribute to our current understanding of Muslim scholarship as it was developing in British India from the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Approach and Research Methodology

As a work of intellectual history, the current study in terms of method draws upon the insights of Quentin Skinner and Peter Hohendahl as guiding thoughts on writing the history of ideas and also as guides to think about exegetical literature in its historical context. These insights help in engaging with primary sources without simply taking their ideas at face value. Skinner emphasizes two aspects of writing intellectual history. First, it is the larger context and the texts themselves that help a historian to understand and map ideas. Second, more importantly, it is the larger relation between diverse texts that reveal what was really intended in an individual text. In the words of Skinner, it is important to know “how what was said was meant, and thus what relations there may have been between various different statements even within the same general context.”³⁵ In the context of the current study, in order to understand more deeply what was intended in individual works of exegesis by a scholar, it is important to read them in the light of his other texts and intellectual exchanges such as in letters and legal verdicts. In addition to Skinner, I found the concept of the “institution of literature” as elaborated by Hohendahl as a useful guiding thought to think about exegetical and hermeneutical literature

³⁵ Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 47. Further revision of the article can be seen in Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57-89.

on the Qur'an in addition to literary analysis.³⁶ Building on the early work on certain aspects of literary theory, reception studies,³⁷ and the theory of the institution of literature,³⁸ Hohendahl highlighted three features of this special kind of institution which I found to be practically useful thoughts to help me as a historian to reflect on my data. His following words capture the gist of his theory:

[The institution of literature] is directly concerned neither with the analysis of texts nor with their genesis and dissemination, but rather with the conditions under which writing and reading occur... Moreover, one would expect a theory of the institution to deal systematically with these conditions. When we speak of conventions and norms, we are concerned not with individual traits but with a system. Third, one would expect the specific character of the institution in relation to other cultural and social institutions, that is, its particular significance and function within society. Finally, one would expect historical specificity to be taken into consideration, for example, differences between various historical epochs and social formations, and the evolution of the institution of literature itself.³⁹

Hohendahl's ideas helped me in engaging with the exegetical and related literature in its colonial settings and in the worlds of Muslim scholarship as well as with the question of what role this literature was playing in different contexts. In some ways, the ideas of both Skinner and Hohendahl converge for writing the history of ideas.

Conceiving the work in the tradition of Skinner and building it on Hohendahl's ideas, the current study places the modern Qur'an commentary in the larger world of colonial India. In

³⁶ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany, 1830-1870*, trans. Renate Baron Franciscono (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

³⁷ In the case of literary theory, Hohendahl reviewed what had been said on authorial intention in the reading of a text. In reception studies, he investigated how the reader became important in this reading which ultimately led to the rise of reader-response theory.

³⁸ Hohendahl hinted at the earlier work that started seeing literature as a social factor as is law or church in a society. He built on Harry Levin who notes that literature "cherishes a unique phase of human experience and controls a special body of precedents and devices; it tends to incorporate a self-perpetuating discipline, *while responding to the main currents of each succeeding period* [emphasis added]." Harry Levin, "Literature as an Institution," in *Literary Opinion in America: Essays Illustrating the Status, Methods, and Problems of Criticism in the United States in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper, 1962), 2:664.

³⁹ Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature*, 34.

addition to answering the question of what were the shifts and continuities in Qur'anic hermeneutics, it also answers the question of what were the factors that shaped or influenced the development of ideas in this location. It aims to transcend the perceived instrumental forces of reform and revivalism, or "modernity" and "tradition," and instead to look for additional milieux in which Qur'anic thought in South Asia was rooted. The study also grapples with the question of how Muslim scholars viewed their relationship with broader Muslim intellectual tradition, including the *tafsīr* tradition, as it evolved over centuries.

Since my focus is on Qur'anic hermeneutics, I see this area of study as encompassing both principles of interpretation and the larger ideas that guide understandings of the Qur'an. Therefore, this study's focus is on how Muslims in colonial India were thinking about the Qur'an, in terms both of discovering the meaning of its vocabulary and verses, and also of forming a larger understanding of the text. On the difference between meaning and understanding, the treatment by Gerald Bruns in his study of important voices in the larger field of hermeneutics is practically useful for studying Muslim voices on the Qur'an. While analyzing both the ideas of those who favoured drawing on authorial intention in reading a text and those of others who privileged the reader as the final voice on meaning of the text, Bruns argued:

The question between them is not whether the meaning of a text is determined by the author or by the reader; rather the two positions taken together describe the movement of understanding itself, where understanding does not stop with the determination of meanings but is an ongoing critical reflection in which we see ourselves and what matters to us in the light of the text, even as we see the text in the light of ourselves and our interests.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 10-11. For the use of the term "Qur'anic hermeneutics" in the context of the larger field of Qur'anic Studies, see Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Qur'anic Hermeneutics: The Views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (1988; repr., New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2012), 46-62.

Having now outlined the focus and approach of the current study, I should discuss some key issues of methodology of my research. The first challenge in such a historical research is to develop a certain periodization for the literature and the ideas under investigation. In mapping the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics in South Asia, one can draw on the considerable body of literature made up of Qur'an commentaries and *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* works that have accumulated over centuries, growing more rapidly from the nineteenth century onwards. Keeping in mind the growth of Muslim engagements with the Qur'an in South Asia and also the rising impact of multiple historical factors on Muslim scholarship there, the "Mutiny" or Indian "Rebellion" of 1857 comes to the fore most prominently as the obvious candidate for an arguable starting point of change or increased intellectual activity.⁴¹ It is important to note that the event in itself was not so significant for its having any direct impact on the development of Qur'anic thought. However, the aftermath to this trauma provides the historian a plausible basis for considering this event a turning point in periodizing the history of ideas on Qur'anic interpretation in South Asia.⁴² There are evident reasons that made the period after 1857 seminal

⁴¹ It is beyond the scope of the current dissertation to deal with the question of what was the nature of "the Mutiny" in itself, that is, whether it is to be understood within the nationalist histories or imperialist historiography of colonial India. The use of the word "Mutiny" in the dissertation is only to refer to the upheaval of 1857 that had lost its violent force near the end of 1858. It has been variously understood as "Indian Mutiny," "Indian Rebellion," "Indian Uprising," "War of Independence," "Sepoy Mutiny," etc. The dissertation in no way attempts to conceptualize the event as it is beyond its scope. For recent understanding and update on the subject of the event of 1857, see Crispin Bates, *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857*, 7 vols. (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013). For the discussion related to general issues of periodization in relation to modern South Asia, see Carl Ernst, "Reconfiguring South Asian Islam: The 18th and 19th Centuries," *Journal of Comparative Islamic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 247 – 272.

⁴² For Barbara Metcalf and others, the effect of the Mutiny on the traditionally educated *'ulamā'* and other scholars such as Sayyid Aḥmad Khān was varied. The *'ulamā'* tried to forget the event and focused instead on the development of religiosity of Muslims in their private spheres. The idea that there was a significant role of the *'ulamā'* in the Mutiny is also disputed. In contrast to the *'ulamā'*, Aḥmad Khān kept the relevance of the event alive and concentrated on developing a strategy to prevent such an occurrence to happen in future. Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (1981; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 86-88. Also see Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 61-91. For an introduction to the event's traumatic character, its influence on the masses, and its relationship with Muslims in British India, see Ilyse R. Morgenstern Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad* (London: Tauris, 2017); Rakhshanda Jalil, "Reflections of 1857 in Contemporary Urdu

for Qur’anic thinking in colonial India. The decades after 1857 saw an intensification of many of the historical processes that were steadily in the offing from the late eighteenth century, a subject Chapter Two studies in detail. A clear impact on Muslim Qur’anic thought was visible in these contexts. There were a number of these processes such as: the acceleration of print technology in British India; the growth of Muslim sectarian polemics as represented around ideas of orthodoxy; Muslim-Christian disputations in which the Qur’an and the Bible constituted the ostensible basis of arguments from both sides; the growing work of Europeans, in their different identities, on studying the Qur’an and the career of the Prophet Muḥammad; the development of conflicting epistemologies and visions of education in Muslim contexts; and the crisis of religious authority in the wake of conflicting visions of reform. All these factors had a direct bearing on Muslim understandings of the Qur’an, particularly in terms of the role that “authentic” understanding of the scripture might play on different fronts. The period after the Mutiny in colonial India witnessed different Muslim responses of considerable intensity, including in the realm of Qur’anic thought, that were the outcome of the larger processes that had been evolving from before the event, and these processes, as noted above, matured further in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In what way the Mutiny in itself had an impact on the initiation and acceleration of these forces and processes mentioned above is a different historical question that is beyond the purview of the dissertation.

The present study marks 1947 as the closing moment of this periodization. While in terms of continuities and ruptures, the significance of this end date may not be very evident, it can still be taken as a useful basis for a future study on regional *tafsīr* and Qur’anic

Literature,” in *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857*, vol. 1, *Anticipations and Experiences in the Locality*, ed. Crispin Bates (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013), 120-131.

hermeneutics. In principle, the year marked the end of British India, the main focus of the current dissertation, and gave birth to the independent states of India and Pakistan. Moreover, there were other ancillary factors, to which Chapter Six will point in more detail, that support this periodization. It is arguable, based on the investigation of larger exegetical literature in the current study, that younger Qur'an commentators from early decades of the twentieth century had started experiencing new milieux that were somewhat different from the ones that their earlier generations were confronting. However, this process of change was slower and thus many of the works and ideas that emerged around 1947 had their effects on the later period, despite the fact that their authors underwent formative phases of their own intellectual formation during the period under study here. The important works on the Qur'an by such famous scholars as °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī (1892-1977), Abū al-A°lā Mawdūdī (1903-1979), and Ghulām Aḥmad Parwēz (1903-1985) had their effects on the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics in the later period. The point is that around 1947 Muslim exegetes were thinking on the Qur'an both in the framework of earlier intellectual movements and new historical contexts informed, for instance, by the further rise of political Islam and the struggle for freedom from the colonial rule.

The second methodological task essential for this dissertation is to choose a representative geographical area where Muslim scholarly activity around the Qur'an was centred. Although Muslims and their scholars were scattered unevenly across colonial India, existing histories of works on the Qur'an in South Asia, which will be discussed in Chapter One, bring to the fore the area of North India as the centre of this scholarly activity. In the case of North India, the nexus of the cities of Delhi, Lucknow, and Agra was crucial in the history of Muslim scholarship. In addition to this nexus, *qaṣbas* ("small towns") all across the United

Provinces were hubs of traditional Islamic learning.⁴³ Furthermore, as Chapter Six will discuss in more detail, Muslim scholarship in the Punjab was also part of larger North India, particularly given the fact that many of the scholars were educated and trained in Delhi and nearby allied areas. Equally important was the fact, as Chapter One shows, that religious works and other forms of literature in North India, after 1857, witnessed an enormous growth in use of the Urdu language, to the extent that Urdu writing started eclipsing the Arabic and Persianate cultures of the pre-modern period.⁴⁴ Works of Qur'anic exegesis in non-Urdu languages in colonial India certainly did make their appearance and indeed gained more visibility from the late nineteenth century, but there were far fewer works on the Qur'an in these languages than in Urdu.⁴⁵ In short, North India, with its large concentration of Urdu-speaking Muslim populations, emerged as the prime location of Muslim scholarly activity around the Qur'an in the Arabic, Persian, and Urdu languages.

The third methodological question important for this study relates to the choice of representative primary sources to focus on, given the significant number of extant works on the interpretation of the Qur'an in the post-Mutiny period. Being considerable in number, Sunni works of exegesis are my main focus. These works also include non-*tafsīr* writings that directly or indirectly comment on Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an. The choice of primary sources in the current study is shaped by concerns for both the depth and the breadth of my research. Thus, for present purposes, my research is based on two sets of primary sources. First, for

⁴³ On the significance of *qaṣbas* in the contexts of Muslim agrarian populations and the traditions of Islamic learning, see Christopher A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); M. Raisur Rahman, *Locale, Everyday Islam, and Modernity: Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ See Chapter One for the emergence of Urdu as the new medium of religious writings in the nineteenth century.

⁴⁵ For religious literature, including Qur'anic exegesis, in regional languages, see °Ibādat Barēlwī and Sayyid Wazīr al-Ḥasan °Ābidī, eds., *Tā'rikh-i Ababiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān wa Hind*, vols. 11-14 (Lahore: Punjab University, 1972-1978).

understanding the sources in depth, the dissertation has narrowed down the choice of works and their authors to three major case studies, that is, the works on the Qur'an by Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), Ashraf °Alī Thānawī (d. 1943), and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (d. 1930). An obvious task in making such a selection is to develop some reliable criteria for this sample and to deal with the question of how far it can help us in mapping shifts and continuities in Qur'anic hermeneutics and the underlying historical forces that influenced them. As will be attested in the individual chapters on these three scholars, my criteria derive mainly from four considerations. First, Muslim scholarly representation after the Mutiny was more clustered around certain kinds of educational institutions that bore the imprints of larger Muslim religious thought in colonial India. Leading educational institutions such as the Madrasa Dār al-°Ulūm at Deoband (established in 1866), the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh (established in 1875), and the Nadwat al-°Ulamā° at Lucknow (established in 1894) became the main breeding grounds of Muslim intellectual activity in North India. If we accept the seminal role of these Muslim institutions in guiding Muslims with their specific visions, understanding the thought of the three chosen scholars is invaluable because of their relationship with their respective institutional frameworks. While Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī were associated with Aligarh and Deoband respectively, the case of Farāhī was a little complex. Not only did he have a connection with Nadwa through Nu°mānī, but he was also rooted in other educational institutions of the time in various ways, including the Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ in the *qaṣba* Sarā°ē Mīr, which he came to steer from 1916 onwards. The significance of this institutional relationship is also manifested in the fact that by studying these three scholars we are not merely studying their Qur'anic thought alone but that of others as well with whom they debated and entered into intellectual contestations over Qur'anic hermeneutics.

Second, seeing the overall oeuvre of these three scholars on Qur'anic topics, it is arguable that their works acquired the shape of larger Qur'an projects, when compared with other scholars of the period. As will be discussed in Chapters Three to Five, there was always a rationale that propelled their prolific Qur'anic works and an agenda that each scholar wanted to fulfill in pursuing his Qur'anic project.

My third criterion for choosing these three case studies is based on the considerable impact each of these three intellectuals and their works had on larger Muslim constituencies and forms of scholarship in British India, specifically with respect to the Qur'an. From this perspective, all three scholars were the source of innovation and controversy on the issues of interpreting the Qur'an in a milieu that was influenced by the era's crisis of religious authority among Muslim circles.

Finally, the choice is influenced by considering the later influence of these scholars and their works on post-colonial thinking about the Qur'an in South Asia. Seen from this perspective, Thānawī significantly influenced later Deobandī writings on the Qur'an as the post-1947 Qur'an commentaries in the Deobandī tradition manifest. If the thought of Aḥmad Khān did not find any proclaimed heir in terms of intellectual genealogy within Qur'anic scholarship, his work nonetheless provoked considerable thinking around understanding the nature of the Muslim tradition, and his person and works on the Qur'an were by all means instrumental, as will be discussed in the chapter devoted to him. In the case of Farāhī, not only did he find in the next two generations some committed intellectual followers, who had a considerable impact on their audiences, but he was also someone who can be provisionally categorized as a religio-secular theorist of interpreting the Qur'an, that is, someone whose thought found recognition, via

his famous student, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1903-1997), even in secular academic circles that privilege a structuralist reading of the Qur'an.⁴⁶

Having narrowed down sources for the purpose of lending depth to the research, my analysis of primary literature will incorporate other important works dealing with Qur'anic interpretation, from the period under study, for charting ideas, trends, and movements in Qur'anic thought. This is intended to provide breadth to my study of the primary sources. Chapter Six attempts to draw concrete conclusions on the development of Qur'anic hermeneutics by analyzing the three case studies together with other selected works written in British India. The choice of these additional works is shaped by two considerations related to the dynamics of Muslim thought in colonial India. First, some key works are chosen which emerged out of either institutional contexts or intra-Sunni sectarian affiliations. These include the works produced by the members of the schools of Dār al-ʿUlūm at Deoband, Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jamāʿat (also known as Barēlwīs), and Ahl-i Ḥadīth. In addition, some important ideas of Qur'anic interpretation stemmed from the works of authors whose original abode was the Punjab, and who had considerable intellectual wanderings and activities in major centres of North India. The necessary examination of these additional works of Qur'anic scholarship and their authors will be presented in Chapter Six. The main focus in the study of these additional sources will be on those sections of their works that discuss principles and ideas related to Qur'anic interpretation.

⁴⁶ This is manifested, for instance, in the reception of the work of Farāhī and his followers in the academic studies on the Qur'an pursued by Mustansir Mir and Angelika Neuwirth. Mustansir Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān: A Study of Iṣlāḥī's Concept of Naẓm in Tadabbur-i Qur'ān* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1986); Angelika Neuwirth, "Form and Structure of the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed November 29, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00070. Also see Neil Robinson, *Discovering the Qur'an: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

A final note is required on the ancillary question of how Muslim scholars viewed their relationship with the past Muslim intellectual tradition. As highlighted above through the case of Nu^ʿmānī, the study of the evolution of Qur’anic hermeneutics is connected with the evolution of Muslim scholarly views in British India on the nature of the Muslim tradition. Muslim ideas on this tradition had a direct bearing on how Muslim scholars viewed each other as either “custodians” or “heretics” in this tradition. Moreover, the typologies of “traditionalist” and “modernist” have been coined in the secular academy in order to understand different types of scholars and their works as they were flourishing in the Muslim world, including South Asia, from the latter half of the nineteenth century. These typologies and the related discourses reflect the academy’s current understanding of modern Muslim scholarship in South Asia. I would focus in my analysis here on one key element of these typologies which seems constant in them and is pertinent to the current study, that is, how different types of Muslim scholars in their religious thought were conceiving a continuity or discontinuity with the Muslim tradition. There is a classic narrative that seems to emerge in the current academic understanding of this relationship. Two typologies stand prominent as we take a glimpse of the discourse on modern Islam: traditionalists and modernists. In the case of British India, modernists have been characteristically portrayed as in favour of Western culture or past Islamic culture. Scholars in this category, such as Aḥmad Khān, are seen as having an ambiguous link with the tradition since they are viewed as insisting on the Qur’an alone to solve issues of religious significance.⁴⁷ They are also seen as building their thought on Western *Aufklärung*. They routinely interpret Islam directly without the accretions of the tradition and instead favour rationalist interpretation

⁴⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islām in India: A Social Analysis* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1946), 14-27.

in order to avoid the “mental fossilization” of traditionalists.⁴⁸ For others, modernists tend to contain “the specific and detailed content of the authoritative tradition as much as possible by limiting it to the Qur’an and authoritative Sunna” and also by focusing on radical reinterpretation and apologetic responses through their linking of the Muslim tradition with Western ideas.⁴⁹ By contrast, traditionalists, often referred to by the term the “*‘ulamā’*,” are seen as “resuscitating classical Islam” by unflinchingly sticking to their intellectual positions. A quote from Wilfred Cantwell Smith on Deoband represents some of the earlier understandings of this group until Muhammad Qasim Zaman’s work⁵⁰ successfully modified its image. Smith wrote with reference to Deoband:

Theologically, the school stands for a rigid orthodoxy, of the classical, Aristotelian type. The door of *ijtihād* (reinterpretation of the Law) is closed tight. Deoband maintains rigorously the premisses of Islām; within the limits of those premisses it is relentlessly rationalist. It attempts to do away with aberrations, compromises, and intellectual laziness. The theological atmosphere is that of an unmitigated scholasticism; the professors use exclusively the old categories of thought. (Hence, they are incapable of understanding, let alone solving, any of the problems, social or philosophic, of the non-feudal society).⁵¹

Moreover, it is argued, traditionalists exhibit extreme reverence for the Islamic tradition and aim to revive the link between an *‘ālim* and an ordinary Muslim through the conservation of its traditionalist heritage based on Muslim traditional sciences (*manqūlāt*).⁵² For others, traditionalists confront the new modern ideas by strictly following the paradigms passed on by the tradition.⁵³ It is also important to note that some works on the history of South Asian Islam

⁴⁸ Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 41-42, 58.

⁴⁹ William Shepard, “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (August 1987): 312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800056750>.

⁵⁰ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁵¹ Smith, *Islām in India*, 295.

⁵² Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, 104.

⁵³ Shepard, “Towards a Typology,” 318.

tend to avoid placing these scholars under such pigeon-holes as traditionalists and modernists. However, their findings on different Muslim scholars and their relationship with the past tradition tend to converge with the evaluations mentioned above.⁵⁴

It is in Zaman, a key historian of the ‘*ulamā*’ in South Asia, that we find a detailed, sophisticated treatment of these two typologies. His study was by all means original as it was aimed at dispelling the long-standing image of the ‘*ulamā*’ class as depicting mental stagnation, reflected in the above quote from Smith. However, in the process of his investigation, Zaman further strengthened these earlier typologies by developing a sophisticated discourse on the Muslim tradition and how the ‘*ulamā*’ claimed their allegiance to it while modernists looked beyond it to the generation of early Muslims. While earlier studies had somewhat indirectly touched on the issue of how different Muslim scholars viewed their relationship with the tradition or how they judged the tradition, Zaman’s work on the Deoband scholarship from the time of British India brought into sharp relief this distinguishing factor that separated the ‘*ulamā*’, the traditionalists, from the modern educated, the modernists. His treatment is based on his study of Muslim scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including Thānawī of Deoband. Zaman writes in his seminal study on the ‘*ulamā*’:

The ‘ulama, as I show in this book, are hardly frozen in the mold of the Islamic religious tradition, but this tradition nevertheless remains their fundamental frame of reference, the basis of their identity and authority. They differ widely in the extent of their actual acquaintance with this tradition... boundaries between the ‘ulama and “modernists” can become blurred, just as they sometimes do between the ‘ulama and the Islamists. Yet, in general terms, it is a combination of their intellectual formation, their vocation, and, crucially, their orientation viz., *a certain sense of continuity* with the Islamic tradition that defines the ‘ulama as ‘ulama; and it is *this sense of*

⁵⁴ See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*; M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967).

continuity that constitutes the most significant difference between them and their modernist and Islamist detractors.⁵⁵

In the case of modernist intellectuals, he notes:

More often than not, however, the effort has been to retrieve the teachings of “true” Islam from the vast and oppressive edifice that centuries of “sterile” scholasticism, “blind” imitation of earlier authorities, and the “intransigence” of the religious specialists had built. In general, the modernist project is guided by the assurance that once retrieved through a fresh but “authentic” reading of the foundational texts, and especially of the Qur’an, the teachings of Islam would appear manifestly in concord with the positions recommended by liberal rationalism.⁵⁶

My study of Muslim scholarship of the Qur’an in British India has led me to depart from these typologies and binary conceptualizations of Muslim scholars as developed in the discourses on modern Islam. Although, Zaman gives some acknowledgement of the fluidity of these typologies, the specific relationship that each group had with the tradition seems to be fixed. As I will show in this dissertation, the issue of these typologies is not an issue of minor concern. To me, it is lying at the heart of understanding modern Islam in the current discourses. In the light of the findings of the current study, a detailed analysis and assessment will be presented in Chapter Six on this topic. A note on the usage of such typologies in the dissertation is in order. Unless otherwise indicated in this dissertation, I will use the two terms, “traditionalist” and “modernist,” to mean what is defined by Zaman in the above quotes. As we have seen, other definitions, such as of William Shepard, converge with Zaman’s.

The current study is structured in the following manner. Chapter One studies the background of pre-Mutiny Qur’anic hermeneutics in South Asia. It studies three different sets of sources to provide the pre-modern context to the later development of modern hermeneutics in British India. These sources are earlier histories of *tafsīr* and earlier Qur’an translations

⁵⁵ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 10; emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 8.

(*tarjama*; pl. *tarājum*) in South Asia; selected works of South Asian pre-modern Qur'an commentaries in Arabic; and the reception history in the post-1857 period of pre-modern works of *tafsīr* and Qur'anic hermeneutics. Chapter Two aims to identify specific historical contexts and forces that came to influence and shape the emergence of ideas of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Chapters Three to Five are focused on prominent individual Muslim exegetes. These will trace the development of ideas of Qur'anic interpretation in the intellectual formation and thoughts of their authors. As explained above, the current study is not intended to focus on the complete *tafsīr* of any exegete. My method of studying an exegete here concentrates on identifying his ideas of and contribution to Qur'anic hermeneutics. The normal structure of a chapter devoted to each exegete begins with a brief biography and account of his intellectual formation. Later it examines his principles of interpretation along with a detailed account of his art of interpretation. By focusing on certain representative textual sites in his commentary, I study how the exegete applies his principles or reads the Qur'anic text using them as their guidelines. In the subsequent sections, the development of his ideas is placed in the contexts of colonial India, his larger intellectual thought, and exchanges with his contemporaries in addition to investigating how his Qur'an project fared. Chapter Six fulfills two objectives. First, it compares and contrasts the three case studies along with additional works of Qur'anic exegesis to draw conclusions in terms of continuities and shifts in modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Second, it compares and contrasts the three Qur'an projects to develop an understanding of the broad conception of the Muslim intellectual tradition, including the exegetical tradition, that the three scholars had in their minds. It will be supported by larger insights from additional literature on Qur'anic interpretation. In this section, I will also critically engage with the question of how

Muslim scholarship in British India has been previously understood in the current discourses on modern Islam and in what ways this understanding needs rethinking.

Chapter One

Pre-1857 Qur'anic Hermeneutics in South Asia

The aim of this chapter is to develop a broad understanding of the nature of Qur'anic hermeneutics in the period prior to the Mutiny. For this purpose, the research methodology is more qualitative and is based on investigating three sources of data. First, I will study the histories of early *tafsīr* and translations of the Qur'an in South Asia. There is no systematic study so far that analyzes these historical works that trace commentaries and *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* works written in the region. The goal here is to review the state of current scholarship on Qur'an commentaries before 1857. Second, I will examine pre-Mutiny trends in Qur'anic hermeneutics and how these trends prefigured, influenced, or shaped the interpretive thinking of the later period. For this purpose, a sample of key pre-1857 *tafsīr* works, in both printed and manuscript form, will be studied. In the study of these sources, the focus is on authors' introductions to their commentaries. This will help in developing an acquaintance with the way these exegetes would position themselves in their historical contexts and with the key principles of interpretation of the Qur'an that they subscribed to. Third, an attempt will be made to trace the reception history, in the post-1857 period, of this earlier intellectual heritage centred on the Qur'an. For this purpose, the focus will be on those post-1857 writings that reflect on the early South Asian exegetical legacy. It will examine how later scholars were thinking about the quality and import of the earlier works that particularly originated in North India.

In methodological terms, the first task for an intellectual historian who is trying to make sense of these three different sources of literature is to develop a working periodization in order

to map the continuities and changes in hermeneutical thought preceding 1857.¹ In the light of these works, the person of Shāh Walī Allāh and his family offer us a convenient but seemingly effective point from which we may think about the period before the Mutiny. Therefore, in studying three sets of historical sources, data will be organized and analyzed in terms of pre-Walī Allāh and post-Walī Allāh periods.² The application of this periodization will be clearer in the three sections dealing with the specific historical sources. The rationale for this periodization is not based on the claim that with Walī Allāh, there were significant shifts in Qur’anic hermeneutics in South Asia. He did initiate some new thinking on the Qur’an but how far it was influential in the decades prior to 1857 demands a separate study. The reason of choosing him is based on his widespread reception in the post-Mutiny period. This periodization will practically help in organizing data around his person. Moreover, in the light of the prior work on Walī Allāh and modern Qur’an commentaries, he is understood as being instrumental in many ways on the subsequent development of Qur’anic thought in South Asia.³ He is considered a proto-type of a “modern” reader of the Qur’an in several ways: in terms of his motivation for translating the Qur’an into Persian vernacular; his movement for reverting back to the Qur’an (*rajū’ ilā al-Qur’ān*) to interpret its meaning and understand Islam; and his encapsulating both the tendencies of revisiting and preserving traditional positions on Qur’anic exegesis. We will see some

¹ Despite an inevitable need for such a literary periodization for a historian, Ted Underwood’s study of English literary periods warns of the pitfalls of artificially creating these temporal divisions, which sometimes do not capture ruptures and continuities in concrete ways. Here in this chapter, Underwood’s insight serves as one of the guiding ideas while concluding about pre-Mutiny hermeneutics. Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2013). Also see René Wellek, “Literary Periodizations,” in *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip P. Wiener, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973), 481-486.

² Here it is important to note that this periodization is meant for the works before the Mutiny and not after the event. By “post-Walī Allāh” works in this chapter is meant the works that were written after him until the Mutiny.

³ Historians in their study of modern *tafsīr* recognize Walī Allāh as a milestone in Qur’anic hermeneutics, particularly in South Asia. Cf. Pink “Striving for a New Exegesis,” 3-6 (see Introduction, n. 9); Francis Robinson, “Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 2-3 (March 2008): 259-281. doi: [10.1017/S0026749X07002922](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X07002922).

elements of these characteristics when we assess his important work on Qur'anic hermeneutics, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*.⁴ Based on this periodization, our task in this chapter is to identify the patterns of exegetical and hermeneutical thought in the centuries and decades preceding 1857.

The Historiography of *Tafsīr* in South Asia

In this section, a review of the histories of South Asian commentaries and related Qur'anic literature is presented. The methodology for investigating this corpus of secondary works will follow two phases. In the first phase, the reader will be oriented via reference to key extant works from earlier literature on the Qur'an, along with some important sidelights on this data. In this stage, the goal is not to enlist all of the extant works of South Asian commentaries as noted by the historians, but to observe some seminal works that informed in nuanced ways the Qur'anic projects and hermeneutics of the post-1857 period. In the second phase, some historical conclusions from these histories will be drawn about the nature of those commentaries and about Qur'anic hermeneutics. These histories are further categorized in this section along three lines: Arabic *tafsīr* works; Qur'an translations and exegesis in Persian; Qur'an translations and exegesis in Urdu.

The Historiography of Arabic Tafsīr Tradition

On a closer scrutiny, the works that chart the Arabic works can be divided into two main categories in terms of how they structure their study. The first category of works examine the

⁴ On the significance of Walī Allāh for South Asian Islam, see Baljon, *Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī* (see Introduction, n. 29). Some viewed Walī Allāh as a revivalist on the lines of Ibn Taymiyya. See Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvī, *Shāh Walī Allāh and his Times: A Study of Eighteenth Century Islām, Politics and Society in India* (Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1980). For the significance of Walī Allāh's work in recognizing the complexity and creativity in Islamic legal thought, see Ebrahim Moosa, introduction to *Shāh Walī Allāh's Treatises on Juristic Disagreement and Taqlīd*, trans. Marcia Hermansen (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), vii-xxi.

South Asian *tafsīr* as part of their broader investigation of the corpus of Islamic literatures in India and other parts of the world over the centuries. These works largely focus and, somewhat mutually agree, on the identification of some key titles in the pre-1857 *tafsīr* works.⁵ M.G. Zubaid Ahmad's work, which falls in this category, was the first thorough attempt at locating the manuscripts and analyzing to some extent the contents of Arabic commentaries written in India. However, his work only scratches the surface of individual commentaries. He typically enlists a work, identifies the place where its manuscript resides, and then offers some very brief comments about it. He occasionally brings in a quote from the work to give his readers a taste of the extant *tafsīr*. However, we can still glean some information about these pre-modern works if we reflect on all the histories of this literature together (which I will do below). The following oldest and extant works from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, some of which have been printed in modern editions, come to our attention strikingly as a result of such broad surveys:⁶ 1) *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān*, better known in South Asia as *Tafsīr-i Raḥmānī*, by ʿAlī bin Aḥmad al-Mahāʿimī (d. 1431), who flourished in the Gujarat region;⁷ 2) *Al-Tafsīr al-*

⁵ M.G. Zubaid Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature: From Ancient Times to 1857* (1946; repr., Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1968). The author's seminal work was based on his PhD thesis at the University of London (1929). Other works that catalogue pre-modern works of Qur'anic exegesis in South Asia include: Otto Loth, *A Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office* (London, 1877), 1-25; Annemarie Schimmel, *A History of Indian Literature: Islamic Literatures of India*, vol. 7, *Modern Indo-Iranian Literatures Part I*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973); Carl Brockelmann, *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*, vol. 2, trans. Joep Lameer (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), 247-248, 484-491, 585. Originally published between 1898-1902 under the German title *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur*.

⁶ These works have been important as will be highlighted when we study the reception history of earlier exegetical works in South Asia. They were also known in the world outside India as some of these works have also been recorded by the seventeenth-century Ottoman bibliographer, Muṣṭafā bin ʿAbd Allāh (d. 1657), better known as Ḥājī Khalīfa. Ḥājī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-Zunūn ʿan Asāmī al-Kutub wa al-Funūn*, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992).

⁷ ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad al-Mahāʿimī, *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān bi-baʿḍ mā Yushīr ilā lʿjāz al-Qurʿān*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Kitāb-Nāshirūn, 2011). As an extant pre-modern Qur'an commentary, al-Mahāʿimī's work has consistently attracted the attention of Zubaid Ahmad, Schimmel, and Brockelmann. He lived during the reigns of the Tughlaq dynasty and Sultan Aḥmad Shāh of Gujarat. Being part of the Gujarat region, his hometown Mahāʿim is a neighbourhood in modern Mumbai.

Muḥammadī by Muḥammad bin Aḥmad Miyānījīyū (d. 1547), also of Gujarat, who flourished in Ahmadabad;⁸ 3) *Sawāṭīʿ al-Ilhām* by Abū al-Fayḍ Fayḍī (d. 1595), the poet laureate at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar;⁹ 4) *Ḥāshiya ʿalā Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* by ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkoṭī (d. 1656), who was based in north-western Punjab and a contemporary of two luminaries of his times: the Naqshbandī Sufi, Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624) and the famous theologian and Ḥadīth expert, ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddīth Dihlawī (d. 1642).¹⁰ As will be shown later in the discussion of the reception history of earlier exegetical works, these commentaries distinguished themselves from other extant and non-extant *tafsīr* works over the centuries until they were eclipsed to some extent by the exegetical output of Walī Allāh and his family in the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries.

The second category of historical works mapping *tafsīr* literature, which stem from the recent decades of the 1970s and 1980s, represents a more thorough effort through detailed manuscript studies of Arabic works on the Qurʾan.¹¹ These manuscripts are mostly located in

⁸ The work has remained in the form of two manuscripts. One lies in the British Library, London, and another partial manuscript is housed in Sir Sālār Jang Library, Hyderabad. Miyānījīyū is also credited with a supercommentary in the form of marginalia (*ḥāshiya*) on al-Bayḍāwī's *tafsīr* which is no longer extant. Sālim Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn awr un kī ʿArabī Tafsīrēn* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jāmiʿa, 1973; Lahore: Idāra-yi Maʿārif-i Islāmī, 1993), 48. Citations from Qidwāʾī's work refer to the 1993 edition.

⁹ Ḥājī Khalīfa recorded it as *Tafsīr al-Hindī*. Abū al-Fayḍ Fayḍī, *Sawāṭīʿ al-Ilhām fī Tafsīr Kalām Malik al-ʿAllām* (Tehran: Privately published by Sayyid Murtaḍā Āyat Allāh Shirāzī, 1996). Fayḍī was the brother of Abū al-Faḍl (d. 1602), the important courtier and advisor in the Mughal court. His father, Shaykh Mubārak bin Khiḍr Nāgorī (d. 1592) had access to the Mughal Emperor Akbar's court as a religious advisor. Nāgorī also wrote an extant Qurʾan commentary, *Manbaʿ ʿUyūn al-Maʿānī wa Maṭlāʿ Shamūs al-Mathānī*, whose only manuscript is lying in the personal library of Sayyid Taqī in Lucknow.

¹⁰ ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm al-Siyālkoṭī, *Ḥāshiya ʿalā al-Tafsīr li-l-Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī* (Quetta: ʿAbd al-Karīm Maktaba Islāmiyya, n.d.). This printed edition is based on the Ottoman edition printed in 1853 under the patronage of Sultan al-Ghāzī ʿAbd al-Majīd Khān (r. 1839-1861).

¹¹ For an extensive survey of literatures, including religious works, in the Indian subcontinent in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, see ʿIbādāt Barēlwī and Sayyid Wazīr al-Ḥasan ʿĀbidī, eds., *Tāʾrīkh-i Ababiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān wa Hind*, 20 vols. (Lahore: Punjab University, 1972-1978). Also see Qāḍī Ḥabīb Allāh, "A History of *Tafsīr* in Indo-Pak Subcontinent" (PhD diss., University of Peshawar, 2005). For specifically Arabic works of Qurʾanic exegesis in South Asia, see Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*; Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Ṣamad Ṣārim, *Tibyān al-Rāsikh Maʿrūf bihi Tāʾrīkh al-Tafsīr* (Karachi: Mīr Muḥammad Kitāb Khāna, Ārām Bāgh, 1937); Ghulām Aḥmad Ḥarīrī, *Tāʾrīkh-i Tafsīr o Mufasssīrīn* (1971; repr., Faisalabad: Malik Sons Publishers, 1999).

European and Indian libraries.¹² In these works, attempts have also been made even to identify those exegetical works that are no longer extant and are discussed only in the biographical dictionaries of Indian religious scholars.¹³ Moreover, on many occasions, these writings have updated the earlier works, in the first category, of Zubaid Ahmad, Annemarie Schimmel, and Carl Brockelmann.¹⁴ Many of these second category of works begin, in attempting to trace the earliest exegetical activity in India, by recounting the story, or perhaps legend, of a ruler of Kashmir close to the end of the ninth century, who asked the Habbārī governor of Sindh, then a province of the Abbasid Caliphate, to send someone to teach Islamic laws to his people. The Habbārī prince appointed an Arab scholar who, during his stay in Kashmir, wrote a *tafsīr* of the Qur'an.¹⁵ Through these and other attempts, historians have laboured hard to trace older works of South Asian *tafsīr* in North India and elsewhere. Moreover, the larger aim of this kind of speculative investigation seems to emphasize the early origins of exegetical activity in the Indian subcontinent. However, despite these commendable attempts, al-Mahā'imī's early fifteenth-century commentary still stands as the oldest extant specimen of a complete regional *tafsīr* in Arabic.¹⁶

¹² For a list of these libraries, see Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 19-20.

¹³ Biographical dictionaries of South Asian religious personalities are abundant and need attention for a systematic study. Some traces of non-extant *tafsīr* works can be seen in Shaykh °Abd al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī, *Akhbār al-Akhiyār fī Aḥwāl al-Abrār*, trans. Subḥān Maḥmūd and Muḥammad Fāḍil (Karachi: Madina Publishing, n.d.). An important Persian work, originally published in 1873, is Ghulām Sarwar Lāhorī, *Khazīnat al-Aṣfiyā'*, trans. Iqbāl Aḥmad Fārūqī (Lahore: Maktaba-yi Nabawīyya, 1990). For a famous biographical dictionary of Indian scholars since the first century of Islam, see °Abd al-Ḥayy al-Lakḥnawī, *Al-ʿlām bi-man fī Tā'rikh al-Hind min al-ʿlām al-Musamma bi-Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir wa Bahjat al-Masāmi' wa al-Nawāzīr*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1999). The first volume of *Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir* was published posthumously in 1931 and the last volume in 1970.

¹⁴ Qidwā'ī updates Zubaid Ahmad's work in terms of correct authorship of works and also of locating hitherto undiscovered works of earlier *tafsīr*. Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 13, 21, 48, 54, 103.

¹⁵ The story has been recorded in *Kitāb °Ajā'ib al-Hind*. See Derryl N. Maclean, *Religion and Society in Arab Sind* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 121-123.

¹⁶ Qidwā'ī reports the manuscript of a *tafsīr*, attributed to Muḥammad Aḥmad bin Sharīḥī Ṭhānēsārī, that exists in the library of Asiatic Society in Calcutta, but the authorship and date of writing need to be investigated further. Another Indian manuscript of a commentary entitled *Tafsīr-i Multaqaṭ*, written by Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan Gēsū Darāz (d. 1425), is not complete. In the light of our current state of knowledge, al-Mahā'imī's commentary can provisionally be termed as the oldest complete manuscript among the extant works of *tafsīr* in South Asia. One of its manuscripts, which Brockelmann and Zubaid Ahmad consulted, lies in Berlin. Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 21-24.

This commentary has invited interest in the Arab world as well, as its modern editions depict. As will be discussed below, it played an instrumental role in the imagination of Muslim commentators of the Qur'an in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Sālim Qidwāʾī's work remains the updated and authoritative work on Arabic commentaries in South Asia.¹⁷ Other works, although important in their analysis of earlier contributions, are limited in their scope.¹⁸ Qidwāʾī categorizes South Asian *tafsīr* in terms of their comprehensiveness and also in terms of their broad type, such as a mystical commentary or a *tafsīr* focused on verses dealing with legal issues. He divides the commentaries into five groups: 1) Complete commentaries such as al-Mahāʾimī's. One notable addition, missed by Zubaid Ahmad and others, to the earlier works of continuing significance is *Zubdat al-Tafsīr* by Muʿīn al-Dīn bin Khāwand Maḥmūd al-Kashmīrī (d. ca. 1674), who was born in upper northern India in Kashmir and later studied under Muḥaddith Dihlawī in Delhi;¹⁹ 2) Partial commentaries such as the exegetical glosses on *āyat al-kursī* ("the throne verse") by Abū Bakr Muḥiyy al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Qādir (d. 1628);²⁰ 3) Super-commentaries such as *Hāshiya* ("marginalia") of al-

¹⁷ See n. 8 above. Originally produced as a doctoral dissertation at the Aligarh Muslim University, Qidwāʾī's work is based on his extensive manuscript studies and can be a guiding document for anyone motivated to conduct research studies on individual Qur'an commentaries of the pre-modern period. This extant *tafsīr* corpus can provide an intellectual historian immense insights into the nature of Muslim scholarship in pre-modern and early modern times in India.

¹⁸ See n. 11 above. *Tāʾrīkh-i Adabiyāt*, an otherwise voluminous work, does not deal specifically with the history of Qur'anic exegesis in South Asia. The main objective is to map some of the key works produced in different languages and genres, including *tafsīr*. Despite this limitation, the broad survey is of immense value for a literary historian.

¹⁹ Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 81-86. Al-Kashmīrī was a Naqshbandī Sufi and a Ḥanafī scholar. His *tafsīr* is also named as *Tafsīr-i Awrangzēbī* for its making the dedication to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). It has four extant manuscripts, of which three are located in India: The Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta; Khudā Bakhsh Library, Patna; and the personal library of Ḥakīm Muḥammad ʿIrfān Khān of Tonk. One manuscript is housed at the library of the University of Cambridge, which I consulted for this chapter.

²⁰ It refers to the Qur'anic verse Q 2: 255 that mentions Allāh as the only deity and His attributes. The verse reads: "God: there is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows what is before them and what is behind them, but they do not comprehend any of His knowledge

Siyālkoṭī on the pre-modern *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī*; 4) Works dealing with topics in *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* such as the *Risāla* (“essay”) of ‘Abd al-Nabī Akbarābādī (d. 1612) on *nāsikh wa al-mansūkh* (“the abrogating and the abrogated verses of the Qur’an),²¹ or on concordances of Qur’anic verses such as *Hādiya Quṭb Shāhī* by Muḥammad ‘Alī Karbalā’ī (d. 1635); 5) Non-existent commentaries reported in biographical works.

The Historiography of Persian Tafsīr Tradition

In the case of Persian works of Qur’anic exegesis in South Asia, there is no academic work that takes them as its main topic. The three volumes (3-5) in the series *Tā’rīkh-i Adabiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pāk wa Hind* give us a good broad overview of the relevant literature. Limited sections of the series are devoted to commentaries on the Qur’an written in Persian. The goal for the editors of and contributors to this volume is to chart the literature in broad strokes and not in detail. The work indicates the dominant character of Arabic *tafsīr* even when the state language was Persian, as in Mughal India. We cannot readily agree with this survey of Persian *tafsīr* literature and its portrayal of a rather subordinate place of Persian exegesis. It appears that the judgments of these authors are based only on the extant *tafsīr* and Qur’an translations in Persian. Yet these authors’ judgment of the rather secondary importance of Persian in the case of Qur’anic works is somewhat corroborated by the silence that marked the post-Mutiny reception of early *tafsīr* in India, especially if one leaves aside the continuous printing of a work entitled

except what He wills. His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous.”

²¹ Although the concept is controversial in the history of the Islamic sciences of the Qur’an, the term “abrogation” broadly refers to the phenomenon of some Qur’anic verses revealed earlier abrogated or revoked by some of the verses revealed later due to some change in circumstances. On many occasions, such “abrogating” and “abrogated” verses dealt with legal issues and “allowed the harmonization of apparent contradictions in legal rulings.” John Burton, “Abrogation,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed November 30, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00002.

Tafsīr-i Qādrī, which was the Urdu translation of the Persian work, *Tafsīr-i Husaynī*, by Mullā Ḥusayn bin °Alī Wā°iz Kāshifī (d. 1504). What we can provisionally conclude is that although Persian as a medium of expression was widespread, we have very little historical evidence proving its dominant character as a medium of expression in the case of works on the Qur'an.

Qāḍī Nabī Bakhsh Baloch outlines the early history of Persian exegetical works beginning with a non-existent *Tafsīr-i Tātārkhānī* written in between 1351 CE and 1381 CE.²² The oldest extant work of Persian exegesis is *Biḥr-i Mawwāj* written by Qāḍī Shahāb al-Dīn Aḥmad bin Shams al-Dīn Dawlatābādī (d. 1445), which deals more with legal and grammatical issues.²³ Historians have also identified some less known Persian works of *tafsīr* written during the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's rule.²⁴

It is with the emergence of Walī Allāh on the Indian scene that we see some more works emerging in Persian that dealt with the Qur'an.²⁵ Walī Allāh's major Qur'anic works in Persian are his: Persian translation of the Qur'an with brief exegetical glosses entitled *Fath al-Raḥmān fī Tarjamāt al-Qur'ān* along with a small introduction (*muqaddima*) on the principles of translating the Qur'an;²⁶ *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī °Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, a concise but influential statement of his view of Qur'anic hermeneutics; and *Fath al-Khabīr*, a collection of traditional materials

²² Qāḍī Nabī Bakhsh Baloch, "Madhab," in *Tārīkh-i Ababiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān wa Hind*, ed. Waḥīd Mirzā, vol. 3, 1000-1526 (Lahore: Punjab University Press, 1971), 60-85. Also see for the sources on the Persian *tafsīr*, Ḥāmid Khān Ḥāmid, "Madhab," in *Tārīkh-i Ababiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān wa Hind*, ed. Mirzā Maqbūl Bēg Badakhshānī, vol. 4, 1526-1707 (Lahore: Punjab University Press, 1971), 123-174; Sayyid Muḥammad °Abd Allāh, "Dīn, Taṣawwuf, Akhlāq," in *Tārīkh-i Ababiyāt-i Musalmānān-i Pākistān wa Hind*, ed. Wazīr al-Ḥasan °Ābidī, vol. 5, 1707-1971 (Lahore: Punjab University Press, 1972), 263-317.

²³ Qāḍī Shahāb al-Dīn Aḥmad bin Shams al-Dīn Dawlatābādī, *Tafsīr Biḥr-i Mawwāj* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1880).

²⁴ Ḥāmid Khān Ḥāmid notes that Muḥaddith Dihlawī also wrote a *ta°līq* ("comments" or "marginalia") on al-Bayḍāwī. Ḥāmid, "Madhab," vol. 4, 152. There is another work *Sharḥ al-Qur'ān Mu°inī* in Persian that is attributed to Mu°in al-Dīn bin Khāwand Maḥmūd al-Kashmīrī (d. ca. 1674), whose Arabic work will be discussed below.

²⁵ °Abd Allāh, "Dīn, Taṣawwuf, Akhlāq," vol. 5, 263-317.

²⁶ The work will be discussed in detail below. Baljon estimates the date of the completion of this work as 1738. Baljon, *Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī*, 11.

(such as *ḥadīths*, and *asbāb*) necessary for understanding the Qur'an. Walī Allāh's eldest son, Shāh °Abd al-°Azīz (d. 1823), whose work is generally understood as an extension of his father's concise writings on the Qur'an, wrote a *tafsīr* of selected suras in Persian under the title *Fath al-°Azīz musammā bihi Tafsīr-i °Azīzī*.²⁷

The Historiography of Urdu Tafsīr Tradition

For the Urdu translations and commentaries of the Qur'an written before and after 1857, Šāliḥa °Abd al-Ḥakīm Sharf al-Dīn's work, based on her manuscript studies, remains the key comprehensive attempt at identifying this sizable body of works.²⁸ Her work basically consists of catalogue entries and brief information and analysis, and it only gives us a very broad overview of the literature without spending much time to discuss any one work at length. However, given the broad picture it paints of this rich literature, it is still a work of immense value for future work on the commentaries and translations of the Qur'an written in pre-colonial and colonial India. Her work maintains its superior position in terms of thoroughness in identifying the extant literature in comparison to some new histories of the genre of the Urdu *tarjama* of the scripture. In addition to discussing notable works that continued to gain attention throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most important insight that Sharf al-

²⁷ Shāh °Abd al-°Azīz, *Tafsīr Fath al-°Azīz musammā bihi Tafsīr-i °Azīzī*, trans. Muḥammad °Alī Chāndpūrī, 4 vols. (Karachi: H.M. Sa'īd, n.d.). The work was written in the later years of his life. Some portions of the *tafsīr* were translated into Urdu in 1847. Later Chāndpūrī translated the text from the beginning. See °Abd Allāh, "Dīn, Taṣawwuf, Akhlāq," vol. 5, 284-285.

²⁸ Šāliḥa °Abd al-Ḥakīm Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum: Tā'riḫ, Ta'āruf, Tabṣara wa Taqābulī Jā'iza* (Karachi: Qadīmī Kutub Khāna, 1981). Other works of significance for the historiography of Urdu commentaries and translations of the Qur'an include: Sayyid Ḥamīd Shaṭṭārī, *Qur'ān-i Majīd kē Urdū Tarājum wa Tafāsīr kā Tanqīdī Muṭāli'ā 1914 tak* (Hyderabad: Niẓāms Urdu Trust, 1982); Aḥmad Khān, *Qur'ān-i Karīm kē Urdū Tarājum: Kitābiyāt* (Islamabad: Muqtadara Qawmī Zabān, 1987); Muḥammad Nasīm °Uthmānī, *Urdū mēñ Tafsīrī Adab: Aēk Tā'riḫī awr Tajziātī Jā'iza* (Karachi: °Uthmāniyya Academic Trust, 1994); Majīd Allāh Qādrī, *Kanz al-Īmān awr Mashhūr Tarājum-i Qur'ān* (Karachi: Idāra-yi Taḥqīqāt Imām Aḥmad Raḍā International, 1999). Sharf al-Dīn has also cited the following works inaccessible to me: Majlis-i Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān, *Jā'iza Tarājum-i Qur'ānī* (Deoband: Maṭba' Dār al-°Ulūm, 1950); Jamīl Naqwī, *Qur'ān-i Majīd kē Urdū Tarājum ma' Mukhtaṣar Tā'riḫ al-Qur'ān wa Tarājum al-Qur'ān* (Adabnumā, 1980);

Dīn's work gives us its highlighting the considerable amount of activity of rendering the Qur'an into Urdu that was going on in these times.

Contrary to the view in the popular imagination that the Urdu translation of the Qur'an by Walī Allāh's other son, Shāh °Abd al-Qādir (d. 1835), was the first attempt of this kind in Urdu, Sharf al-Dīn begins by identifying a manuscript lying in the Āṣifiyya library in Hyderabad in the Deccan, whose writer dates it to 1676, although she mentions scholarly disagreement over its date of composition.²⁹ This work is entitled *Tafsīr-i Wahhābī* written in Dakkanī Urdu in four volumes. Moreover, apart from this complete translation and commentary, there is a partial translation in Urdu that dates back to 1591. Given the history of the development of the Urdu language, these manuscripts deserve a detailed study to form a better opinion about the nature of the language in which they were written.

Sharf al-Dīn divides her survey into four sections: one section documenting works before the eighteenth century, and the other three dealing with works written in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We can glean certain initial insights from her work. In the case of the works before 1857, the writings originated in the family of Walī Allāh provide a working periodization. Looking at this history in retrospect through the lens of the reception that these translations and exegetical works had, the works emanating from the pens of Walī Allāh's sons, Shāh °Abd al-Qādir (d. 1835) and Shāh Rafī° al-Dīn (d. 1817), achieved a somewhat

²⁹ She cites °Abd al-Ḥaqq (1870-1961), the renowned historian of Urdu language, as the one who occasioned a debate on its date and the type of language used. Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 82.

canonical status over time.³⁰ Before °Abd al-Qādir’s seminal work, *Muḍīḥ al-Qur’ān*,³¹ there had already been a steady rise of the literary genre of Urdu *tarjama* and *tafsīr* of the Qur’an. Many of the works of this genre remained in the shape of private works that continued to exist only in manuscript form. These included partial translations as well as complete works of Urdu renderings of the Qur’an. Moreover, these works originated in different local dialects of Urdu such as Dakkanī, Gujarātī, and Awrangābādī. This diversity anticipated a new battle among different post-1857 schools of thought over the authenticity of a Qur’an translation as will be discussed in the chapters on the individual exegetes.

Insights from the Historiography of South Asian Tafsīr

After taking a glimpse at the nature of exegetical activity in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, we can attempt to draw certain initial historical and hermeneutic insights from these histories of Qur’an translations and commentaries. What emerges, first, through the study of this literature is the very Arabic character of Qur’anic exegesis in South Asia before the Mutiny. Despite the presence of Qur’anic works in Persian and Urdu, Qur’anic thought seemed to have generated more in Arabic than in other languages. Even after post-1857 period, the pressure to write about the Qur’an in Arabic continued to some degree, and the motivation to do so remained strong.³²

³⁰ How much actual unease with °Abd al-Qādir’s translation was existing in the earlier part of the nineteenth century is a separate historical question. °Abd al-Ḥaqq was not much convinced with the quality of its language. By way of comparison, he found the translation of Sharīf Khān Dihlawī (d. 1807), written towards the end of the eighteenth century, as worthier of gaining attention for its literary qualities and accuracy in the task of rendering the Qur’an in Urdu. Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur’ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 82-83, 87. On the issue of the varieties of Urdu evolving in different parts of India, see °Abd al-Ḥaqq, “Purānī Urdū mēṅ Qur’ān-i Sharīf kē Tarjumē awr Tafsīrēṅ,” *The Urdu*, January (1937) as cited in Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 55.

³¹ Original title, under which it was written, was *Muḍīḥ-i Qur’ān*. Later *Muḍīḥ al-Qur’ān* became popular with publishers. Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur’ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 189.

³² Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Arabic, the Arab Middle East, and the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no.1 (April 1998): 59-81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25183466>.

For that reason, later Qur'an commentators like Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar, Şiddīq Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890) kept on using Arabic as the medium of expression in their works on the Qur'an and other Islamic sciences.

Second, these histories incidentally present us with useful knowledge about the nature of the early exegesis of the Qur'an in South Asia. Although the stress in their works was on tracing an exegetical work, the historians of this literature attempted to characterize the earlier commentaries in broad strokes. We come to know through their works that early commentaries had a clear stress on the principles of *naẓm* ("coherence") and *rabṭ-i āyāt* (the "inter-connectedness of verses"),³³ such as in the works of al-Mahā'imī, Miyanjiyū, and Mubārak bin Khidr Nāgorī (d. 1001), father of Fayḍī and Abū al-Faḍl.³⁴ We also find commentators interpreting Qur'anic verses as a way of highlighting the underlying shade, in the scripture, of eulogizing the Prophet's good traits (*manāqib*).³⁵ There is also a visible emphasis on unfolding mystical aspects of the divine word in many commentaries, including those of Muḥammad bin Aḥmad Thānēsari (d. 1417),³⁶ Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan Gēsū Darāz (d. 1425),³⁷ al-Mahā'imī, and Miyanjiyū. Moreover, we come across writings that are reminiscent of standard works of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* on the pre-modern lines of al-Zarkashī and al-Suyūṭī. This is manifested in the

³³ These terms as used in Qur'anic hermeneutics refer to interpreting the Qur'an as a coherent text and not a set of disjointed verses. These will be dealt with in detail in the subsequent chapters. A basic orientation to the history of the concepts of *naẓm* and *rabṭ* can be seen in Chapter Four.

³⁴ Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 53-59.

³⁵ *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* by °Abd al-Wahhāb Bukhārī (d. 1526). It is probably not an extant *tafsīr*. Some of its parts are found in the writings of Muḥaddith Dihlawī. Muḥaddith Dihlawī, *Akḥbār al-Akḥiyār*, 453-460. Also see Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 43-46. As will be discussed below in the section on the reception history of pre-modern works, the commentary continued to gain some attention till the twentieth century for its innovative technique of interpreting the Qur'an.

³⁶ *Kāshif al-Ḥaqā'iq wa Qāmūs al-Daqā'iq*. The manuscript is housed in Asiatic Society, Calcutta. Qidwā'ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 21-24.

³⁷ *Tafsīr-i Multaqāṭ*. The commentary does not exist in complete. Qidwā'ī identifies its author by analyzing its manuscripts located in the British Library and Nāşiriyya Library, Lucknow.

extant writings of Nāgorī and Fayḍī. Similarly, there were works in both the pre-modern and early modern traditions that gave preference to interpreting the scripture according to the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law. This was done by Kalīm Allāh Jahānābādī (d. 1728),³⁸ Thanā° Allāh Pānīpatī (d. 1810),³⁹ who is usually introduced as a student of Walī Allāh, and others. Reflecting on these insights, we may provisionally argue that these writings were not making radical departures from the early and medieval Arabic *tafsīr* tradition of the larger Islamic world, a point that is corroborated in the next aspect of this literature.

Third, our study of the pre-1857 exegesis brings to light the dominant influence of pre-modern Arabic commentaries, in particular *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, in the works of the authors just discussed. The great impact of these two Arabic works is also corroborated by studies undertaken on the history of Muslim education in South Asia.⁴⁰ Furthermore, recent attempts to revisit the historiography of Arabic *tafsīr* in other Muslim lands point to their influence in South Asia as well. Walid Saleh considers works like that of al-Bayḍāwī, which he placed in the category of Qur'an commentaries that did not conspicuously privilege exegesis based on the traditions of the Prophet and his Companions,⁴¹ as the dominant form of exegesis until the rise of the Damascene scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) with his radical hermeneutics, stressing the value of ḥadīth traditions in the interpretation of the Qur'an.⁴² Saleh argues that it was only in recent centuries particularly with the emergence of the Wahhābī school

³⁸ Shaykh Kalīm Allāh Jahānābādī, *Qur'ān al-Qur'ān bi-l-Bayān*. The manuscripts are located in Hyderabad at the Āṣifiyya Library and the Osmaniya University Library. It has also been printed by Maṭba° Aḥbāb, Delhi in 1873 on the margins of the Urdu translation of the Qur'an by Shāh °Abd al-Qādir.

³⁹ The commentary remains in print to this day and is well received, especially in Deobandī circles. Qāḍī Thanā° Allāh Pānīpatī, *Tafsīr al-Maẓharī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā° al-Turāth al-°Arabī, 2004).

⁴⁰ Bakhtiyār Ḥusayn Ṣiddīqī, *Barr-i Saghīr Pāk wa Hind kē Qadīm °Arabī Madāris kē Nizām-i Ta°līm* (Lahore: Idāra-yi Thaqāfat-i Islāmiyya, 2009), 21, 27, 30. Ṣiddīqī's work builds on earlier works on the history of Muslim education in South Asia.

⁴¹ Saleh, "Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics."

⁴² Saleh, "Historiography of *tafsīr* in Arabic."

that the exegetical works on the pattern of Ibn Kathīr’s commentary received prominence. Saleh conveys the interesting fact that the first modern printing of Ibn Kathīr appeared on the margins of the Arabic *tafsīr* of Ḥasan Khān (d. 1890),⁴³ the Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar mentioned above. Saleh contends that from this point onwards, that is, with the rise of traditionalist and fundamentalist literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century, later histories of *tafsīr* works were rewritten with a view to entrench the idea that the Qur’an had always been interpreted through the method of *tafsīr bi-l-mā’ thūr* (“exegesis based on traditions”).

In addition to the above observations regarding the earlier exegesis in South Asia, the histories also tend to accentuate a few other pre-Mutiny aspects of the genre of exegesis. In terms of the geographical locale of these works and their authors, the Delhi-Agra-Lucknow nexus served as the centre of this interpretive activity, despite the fact that there had been other established intellectual peripheries, such as Bhopal, Gujarat, and some other areas in the western and southern Punjab. Moreover, these histories give the impression that courtly patronage during the Sultanate period in general, and the Mughal era in particular, fostered the writing of Qur’anic commentaries. Historians see in Nāgorī and Fayḍī some kind of a court-patronized tradition of *tafsīr*. This later trend seemed to accelerate under the Mughal Emperors Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. This patronage continued later as we see Mughal Emperor Shāh °Ālam II supporting projects of Urdu translation too. Apart from geographical centralization and courtly patronage, the particular genealogies of exegetes reflect the centralization of this hermeneutical activity either around Sufī schools or around the scholarly triad of Muḥaddith Dihlawī, Sirhindī, and al-Siyālkoṭī, who were contemporaries during the times of established Mughal rule. These three influential luminaries flourished in between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The

⁴³ Ibid., 33.

intellectual origins of different works and the Qur’anic hermeneutics underlying them depict genealogies reaching to these three persons. The impact of this scholarly triad can also be assessed in the later reception history of these scholars’ works that gives the impression that these three were seen in post-1857 traditionalist circles as the custodians of an “orthodox” tradition established in earlier centuries, from before the rise of Walī Allāh and his family. In other words, the exegesis originating from these centres was later perceived as being in safe hands in those times.

In the light of the above analysis, three features seem to dominate the character of this exegetical literature: 1) The Arabic character both in terms of the medium of writing and its reliance on classical *tafsīr* tradition, a character that did not change till the rise of Urdu exegesis after the Mutiny, and that too evolved slowly; 2) the particular geographical locale of Mughal urban centres and its related pattern of seeking courtly patronage; 3) and finally, rootedness in the pre-modern tradition of scholarship produced by the three seventeenth-century luminaries.

In addition to the above, a critical survey of the histories of exegetical literature in Urdu reveals three historical tendencies. First, the steady rise of the printing press, from around the 1820s, made more opportunities available for the educated people to render the Qur’an into Urdu. This tendency, however, was still developing and was not comparable to what we see with the emergence of the publishing houses, such as Naval Kishore Press (est. 1858), in the post-Mutiny period. The second tendency was the reproduction of an old pattern of state and institutional patronage for such kinds of religious literature. We see Mughal Emperor Shāh °Ālam II (r. 1760-1806) continuously patronizing translations of the Qur’an into Urdu. Linked to this imperial patronage were initiatives like the translation of the Qur’an completed in 1804 under a team of Muslim scholars commissioned at Fort William College in Calcutta under the

supervision of Dr. John Gilchrist (d. 1841).⁴⁴ In addition, regional kings and rulers, like the Nawab of Awadh, were also encouraging scholars under their patronage to write translations of the Qur'an. Third, these histories throw light on the issue of the authenticity of a translation in the decades before 1857. In general, the major feature of the era was the struggle between rendering an idiomatic translation and pursuing a stricter phraseology that remained loyal to the original Qur'anic Arabic text. The overall reception of these works as outlined by these histories also point to the fact that the works produced in the family of Walī Allāh were not automatically authoritative from the beginning. The establishment of their authoritative status seems to have been a post-1857 phenomenon or something promoted by Deoband's scholars close to the end of the nineteenth century. In short, there are hints that indicate fluidity in the reception of the works of °Abd al-Qādir and Rafī° al-Dīn. As Sharf al-Dīn's history of Urdu *tafsīr* suggests, there remained other competing works that continued to gain acknowledgment for their linguistic and religious merit and that remained in print for a long time.

Qur'anic Hermeneutics in Pre-Mutiny India

Pre-Walī Allāh Hermeneutics

In addition to the study of the historiography of earlier *tafsīr* works, directly studying some key primary sources of Qur'anic exegesis from the pre-Mutiny period can help in charting new trends in Qur'anic hermeneutics. I will organize the data based on the periodization around the person of Walī Allāh. There are a few trends that come to our notice when we directly engage with the ideas offered in the introductions (sing. *muqaddima*) of some of the famous extant *tafāsīr*. These works have been selected based on their relatively better reception in the

⁴⁴ Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 95-96.

latter half of the nineteenth century. The brief analysis here is not meant to characterize the *tafsīr* works of the period. Instead, it represents an initial attempt to identify the linguistic and hermeneutical approaches set out in the introductions of these works and pave the way for future studies in this area.⁴⁵

In al-Mahāʾimī, who flourished in fifteenth-century Gujarat and is said to have been inspired by the mystical thought of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240),⁴⁶ we have a concrete specimen of a medieval thinker who attempted to chart new exegetical ground, but within the bounds of traditional resources of Qurʾanic exegesis. In his *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān*, al-Mahāʾimī emerged with a detailed technique of making connections between verses of the Qurʾan and offered a somewhat developed concept of the unity of a sura. In other words, his was a sophisticated attempt to read the Qurʾan as a coherent text. However, al-Mahāʾimī's introduction to his commentary does not reveal the historical context that influenced him to study the Qurʾan from this particular angle. According to this interpretive technique, al-Mahāʾimī characteristically connected the initial formula of basmala (also called *tasmiya*), that is, *bi-sm Allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* ("in the name of Allāh, the Merciful, the Benevolent") in the beginning of each Qurʾanic sura with the contents and theme(s) of the sura. For instance, he

⁴⁵ As Karen Bauer's investigation of the classical *tafsīr* suggests, these introductions often occur as the sites where exegetes tend to position themselves vis-à-vis others and also chart their hermeneutical projects. Karen Bauer, "Justifying the Genre: A Study of Introductions to Classical Works of *Tafsīr*," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qurʾanic Exegesis (2nd/8th – 9th/15th Centuries)*, ed. Karen Bauer (London: Oxford University Press & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2014), 35-69.

⁴⁶ Qidwāʾī, citing the biographical dictionary *Āb-i Kawthar*, considers al-Mahāʾimī a follower of Ibn ʿArabī's thought, in particular the latter's concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* ("the oneness of being"). Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 36. One editor of his *tafsīr* notes al-Mahāʾimī's authoring of a *sharḥ* ("exposition") on Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mizyadī, "Muqaddimat al-Taḥqīq," in *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān*, by ʿAlī bin Aḥmad al-Mahāʾimī, vol. 1 (Beirut: Kitāb-Nāshirūn, 2011), 19.

linked the beginning formula with the contents of Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2:2)⁴⁷ in the following way:

In the name of Allāh, Most Gracious, Most Merciful, Who manifests His person and His attributes in His book, the book that comprises the exposition of His perfection. He is the Most Gracious because He removed all doubts from this book by making it a miracle for all; He is the Most Merciful because He made the book a guide for God-fearing people.⁴⁸

Al-Mahā'imī continued, throughout the sura, to construct the connection between the basmala formula and other verses at different intervals. In the same manner of interpretation, he linked the formula in Sūrat al-Āl 'Imrān (Q 3) to the prophethood of Jesus, one of the exegete's identified themes of the sura.⁴⁹ Apart from this hermeneutical method, his introduction betrays not much evidence of any new thinking. Indeed, he advised caution about forming individual opinions in the interpretation of the Qur'an (*tafsīr bi-l-rā'y*), although he did not reject doing so altogether.

The early seventeenth-century commentary, *Al-Tafsīr Al-Muḥammadī*, was written by the Gujarātī Chishtī scholar, Mīyānījīyū, who also authored a *hāshiyā* on *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī*.⁵⁰ What his whole *tafsīr* actually tells one about his interpretive practice is a separate question that would need a detailed study, but its brief introduction does not discuss any hermeneutical principles in detail except for the need for a *tafsīr* to connect verses with each other, which, he thought, had not been done before. The introduction also hints at the unavailability to him of al-Mahā'imī's *tafsīr*, a classic specimen of this technique of interpretation. Moreover, he ceremonially

⁴⁷ The verse reads: "This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God."

⁴⁸ Al-Mahā'imī, *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān*, vol. 1, 78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵⁰ For its introduction (*muqaddima*) and broad details, I studied the manuscript located in the British library, London. Muḥammad bin Aḥmad Mīyānījīyū, *Al-Tafsīr al-Muḥammadī*, Asian and African Studies Collections, No. IO Bijapur 290, the British Library, London.

acknowledged that some of the Qur'anic verses were *muḥkamāt* ("clear verses") and others were *mutashābihāt* ("allegorical verses") without clearly mentioning his own position on the interpretation of these two kinds of verses.⁵¹ It appears that he was thinking within the larger Arabic tradition of *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* works on this question. This issue would emerge with renewed intensity in the post-1857 period. In addition to that, Mīyānījīyū also focused on deriving legal principles from Qur'anic verses. Apart from these features, his *tafsīr* seems to be more on the lines of medieval Arabic *tafsīr* which employed traditional resources of Qur'anic interpretation such as *asbāb al-nuzūl* materials along with the distinguishing characteristic of avoiding lengthy interpretation of verses. Another extant *tafsīr*, entitled *Kāshif al-Ḥaqā'iq wa Qāmūs al-Daqā'iq*, was identified by Zubaid Ahmad as the same as *Al-Tafsīr al-Muḥammadī*. However, Qidwā'ī differs with him on this and attributes the former work, being more on Sufi lines, to Muḥammad bin Thānēsārī. A detailed study can bring to light more distinguishing features of *Al-Tafsīr al-Muḥammadī* in comparison to the other work. Moreover, although Mīyānījīyū's *muqaddima* does not emphasize Sufi interpretation, a closer study may discover mystical elements in his work since he belonged to Chishtī order.

The case of the *tafsīr* entitled *Zubdat al-Tafāsīr* is made clear by the work of Ejaz Akram who reads it as a specimen of the type like *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* and *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī*, in an

⁵¹ The main Qur'anic verse that mentions the two terms is Q 3:7: "it is He who has sent this Scripture down to you [Prophet]. Some of its verses are definite [*muḥkamāt*] in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous [*mutashābihāt*]. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and to pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, 'We believe in it: it is all from our Lord'—only those with real perception will take heed." The two terms, *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt*, have invited a considerable debate in terms of their Qur'anic use and meaning in the history of Qur'anic exegesis and *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* works. As Leah Kinberg notes, "In reference to the Qur'ān or its verses, the active participle *mutashābih* (or *mutashābihāt*) appears twice with the sense of "ambiguous" or "similar." Ambiguous is sometimes interpreted as "allegorical." See Leah Kinberg, "Ambiguous," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed January 21, 2018, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00009.

abridged form though.⁵² The commentary was written by the Kashmīrī Naqshbandī exegete Muʿīn al-Dīn al-Kashmīrī, son of Khāwand Maḥmūd, who was a contemporary of Muḥaddith Dihlawī and al-Sīyālkotī. Akram’s thorough study of this medieval-to-early modern exegetical text lets us reflect back, to some extent, on the nature of *tafsīr* in earlier centuries in South Asia. Some of the relevance of this commentary is also attested by the fact that it continued to be copied, to some degree, even in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The latest manuscript we have of it had been copied in 1877 for the Nawab of the princely state of Tonk.⁵³ My study of the actual manuscript, carried out after reading Akram’s valuable work, brings to light some features of Qur’anic interpretive thought in the centuries before Walī Allāh. In particular, the manuscript study and Akram’s work together highlight the motivation behind author’s work. Akram opines that commentaries in those times were written as a means to contest issues around orthodoxy and heresy. This stress on overcoming heresy was also mentioned by al-Kashmīrī in the introduction to his *tafsīr*. But he did not hint at which groups he was viewing as heretical, although he dedicated his work to the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Historians of earlier *tafāsīr* in South Asia have also noted this fact of intellectual rivalries in the writing of Qur’anic exegesis. Therefore, it appears that some commentaries of the Mughal period were presented as attempts to revive the conventional exegetical positions found in the Arabic commentaries such as *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī* and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*. These South Asian works are seen as meant to get rid of perceived *bidaʿa* (“innovations in religious matters”). Moreover, in many cases,

⁵² I studied the manuscript lying in the library of the University of Cambridge. Shaykh Muʿīn al-Dīn bin Khāwand Maḥmūd al-Kashmīrī, *Tafsīr-i Awrangzēbī*, manuscript dated 1075/1664-5, King’s Collection Pote Number 291, Library of the University of Cambridge. The only detailed academic study of al-Kashmīrī’s *tafsīr* is Ejaz Akram, “Zubdat al-Tafāsīr li-Shaykh Khawāja Muʿīn al-Dīn al-Kashmīrī (d. 1674)” (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 2004). Akram has also edited al-Kashmīrī’s text and printed it in his doctoral dissertation along with detailed footnotes that display the use of early and medieval Arabic *tafāsīr* by the exegete.

⁵³ Akram, “Zubdat al-Tafāsīr,” 77. A scribe copied the text in 1877 for the Nawab of the princely state of Tonk.

commentaries also positioned themselves as carrying a specifically Ḥanafī legal orientation. Akram thinks that exegetes such as al-Kashmīrī participated in the imperial projects of establishing orthodoxy in the matters of jurisprudence and helped these efforts through their writings of *tafsīr*. But that comment seems to be influenced by nationalist historians who saw Muslim religious history as informed by the imagined split between the “religious” Aurangzeb and his “heretical” brother, Dārā Shikoh (d. 1659).⁵⁴ In addition, these *tafsīr* relied to some degree, as Akram’s work also reveals, on traditional narratives and reports supporting Qur’anic interpretation, such as *isrā’iliyyāt* (“legends of the Jews”)⁵⁵ and *asbāb al-nuzūl*. The actual debates on the use and authenticity of *isrā’iliyyāt* in the circles of Qur’anic exegesis had to await until the time of Walī Allāh, who raised his concern on employing these Jewish legends for explaining the Qur’an.

The *tafsīr* of Gēsū Darāz follows more of a Sufī pattern of Qur’anic exegesis, splitting the work into *ḥaqā’iq* (“realities”), in which he offered some important explanation of a verse; *laṭā’if* (“subtleties”), where he discussed any related story or historical episode; and *multaqaṭ* (“gleanings”) in which he addressed the meanings of Qur’anic vocabulary in more detail.⁵⁶ But in general, one finds more Sufī explanations and less conventional hermeneutical thinking in his work. His introduction to the commentary does not outline any specific principles that he followed in writing his work. However, there are indications in his *tafsīr*, as noted by Qidwā’ī,

⁵⁴ For an introduction to this nationalist historiography, see Katherine Butler Brown, “Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of His Reign,” *Modern Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (January 2007): 77-120, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4132345>.

⁵⁵ Referring to its Jewish origins, *isrā’iliyyāt* is “an Arabic term covering three kinds of narratives, which are found in the commentators on the Qur’ān, the mystics, the compilers of edifying histories and writers on various levels.” G. Vajda, “*isrā’iliyyāt*,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al, 2nd ed., accessed February 5, 2018, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3670.

⁵⁶ Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥasan Gēsū Darāz, *Tafsīr-i Multaqaṭ*, Asian and African Studies Collections, IO No. 1570 & B 303, the British Library, London. There is some disagreement on the authorship of this work. After evaluating different manuscripts, Qidwā’ī attributes it to Gēsū Darāz. Qidwā’ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 29.

that Gēsū Darāz was offering his own opinions on controversial issues such as the nature of the Ascension of the Prophet in his journey to the heavens as mentioned in Q 17:1. Gēsū Darāz noted the disagreements on this question and opined that there were two rounds of Ascension. First, the Prophet ascended to the heavens with his body and soul (*rūh*) and later travelled only with his soul.⁵⁷

The *tafsīr* entitled, *Sawāṭi^c al-Ilhām* by the poet laureate in Akbar's court, Fayḍī, seemed to occasion some sort of controversy in the time of the author, at least within court circles. Like his father and brother, Fayḍī was patronized by the emperor but other conservative *‘ulamā³* opposed his position. Prominent among them was ^cAbd al-Qādir Badāyūnī (d. 1605) who wrote a rebuttal of Fayḍī's exegetical enterprise as reported by Qidwā³ī.⁵⁸ But reading Fayḍī's *muqaddima* to his *tafsīr* brings to light no radical non-traditional element in the way he imagined his work. Instead he introduced the traditional sciences of the Qur'an and did not position himself differently in any way. His *muqaddima* does deal with conventional topics in *‘ulūm al-Qur'ān* such as *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* but, in general, the author discussed them within the paradigms of pre-modern Arabic thought on *‘uṣūl al-tafsīr*, in which early opinions were privileged. The only striking thing is his adoption of the Arabic literary technique of writing in the style of *al-ṣan^ca al-muhmala* (“the art of avoiding dots”) whereby a writer chooses not to employ words having Arabic letters containing dots.⁵⁹ If one studies the rebuttal of Fayḍī by Badāyūnī in the light of Qidwā³ī's work, one finds that what his opponent said was only generic

⁵⁷ Qidwā³ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 30.

⁵⁸ Qidwā³ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 63-68. Qidwā³ī gives citation of Badāyūnī's *Muntakhab al-Tawārīkh* for this controversy.

⁵⁹ Zubaid Ahmad explains the use of this literary device as manifesting a literary skill in Arabic language and literature. Otherwise, it seemed to him an artificial commentary which might be compared to *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* for its brevity in interpreting Qur'anic verses. Zubaid Ahmad, *Contribution to Arabic Literature*, 28-29.

in nature and lacked any specific criticism of Fayḍī for adopting heretical position in the matters of Qur’anic interpretation. As will be discussed below in the section on the reception of pre-modern *tafsīr* works, Fayḍī enjoyed a good reputation in the generation of Muslim thinkers who were writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, having no dots on the Arabic letters does not lead one to find any new Qur’anic hermeneutics, although this showed his mastery of skills in Arabic language.

The analysis undertaken above is not meant to systematically characterize the Qur’an commentaries written before the times of Walī Allāh. It is simply an attempt to lay out the linguistic and hermeneutical approaches as set forth in the introductions of these pre-modern works or to consider what was sometimes noted in the histories of *tafsīr* works. Although debates on topics from *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* were present from the early phases of Islamic history such as on *naskh*, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, and *mutashābihāt*, pre-modern commentators in South Asia were evidently not sensing any need to explain them in new vein. It was only with the rise on the scene of Walī Allāh, who is understood to have privileged the Qur’ān in religious matters over other sources, that we find a renewed interest in these topics and thus a larger interest in the very principles with which to interpret the Qur’an. But that renewed interest did not gain ground immediately after the Delhi savant. It only intensified in the decades after 1857.

What we learn from the pre-Walī Allāh exegetical works is the fact that they transferred to posterity the challenge of interpreting the Qur’an in changing times without offering any radically new ways of approaching the text. This task was left to Walī Allāh, whose thought is discussed below. Nonetheless, there were four clear elements that these earlier works of *tafsīr* bequeathed to the generations of Muslim scholars writing after the 1857. The first was the practice of thinking about the Qur’an through the lens of traditional exegetical resources such as

exegetical ḥadīths, *isrāʿīliyyāt*, and *asbāb al-nuzūl*. On some occasions, we do find instances where exegetes criticized the careless use of early traditions, but in general, there was no visible tendency to develop new hermeneutical principles in a systematic manner. The second was the idea of *naẓm* and *rabṭ-i āyāt* in its South Asian background. This notion of Qurʾanic verses as having some kind of inter-connectedness was quite conspicuous in many *tafsīr* works that have survived. However, apart from al-Mahāʿimī, early exegetes were focused only on building linear relationships between consecutive verses and not on reading the Qurʾan in its totality as a coherent text. In al-Mahāʿimī we had the hints of reading each sura as a coherent literary unit, and that is why al-Mahāʿimī was received universally in the latter half of the nineteenth century when the Qurʾan’s structure and arrangement was under the fire of European and other non-Muslim criticism (see Chapter Two for more details). The third was some degree of a tendency to interpret the Qurʾan with a view to dismiss so-called “heretical” positions. When this tendency gained a sound footing and what the nature of these debates about orthodoxy was are historical questions that can be addressed separately, but various historians of the exegetical literature have noted this element of asserting orthodoxy in some works that have survived. Perhaps it gained particular impetus in those works that were written under imperial or princely patronage as in the case of al-Kashmīrī’s work. Finally, as Qidwāʿī’s study highlights, there was a notable degree of literary activity going on in the realm of Sufi interpretation of the Qurʾan, particularly for helping a traveller on the Sufi path. The quest in such writings was to unfold esoteric elements of the Qurʾan. For instance, Thānēsārī noted that the aim of his commentary was to guide the reader on the matters of *ṭarīqat* (“Sufi path in specific Sufi orders”) and *ḥaqīqat* (“reality”).⁶⁰ In general, the pre-Walī Allāhī *tafsīr*, corroborated by the histories of this

⁶⁰ Qidwāʿī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 23-24.

exegetical genre as well, tends to feature these four elements, which eventually became part of the intellectual legacy that was transferred to the next generations, who in turn had to face the intellectual storm of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Walī Allāh's Qur'anic Hermeneutics

In the preface to his Persian translation of the Qur'an entitled *Fath al-Rahmān*, Walī Allāh announced that his new rendering was meant for both the common man and specialists.⁶¹ He did not make it clear what exactly was in his mind when he designated this large audience. At a simpler level, we can conjecture that all those who could read Persian, particularly in eighteenth-century Delhi, were his audience. This instance of translating the Qur'an can be seen as an initial moment of the eclipsing of the status enjoyed by Arabic in the disciplines that made up the Islamic sciences in South Asia. Within a few decades of his demise, vernacular Qur'an translations were making their way to influence the sphere of Qur'anic exegesis, particularly as seen in the rise of Urdu translations. However, despite the importance of Qur'anic scholarship as produced by Walī Allāh and his sons, one needs to take caution in identifying change and continuity in Qur'anic hermeneutics in South Asia, particularly in North India. The question of Walī Allāh's influence is a challenging one. How his intellectual influence actually grew is a separate historical question, despite the possibility that his influential tracts, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* and *Fath al-Rahmān*, can be interpreted as marking a break from the past scholarship. Moreover, his sons' rendering of the Qur'an into Urdu can be viewed as an early moment of the emergence

⁶¹ For the introduction to his translation of the Qur'an, I used Shāh Walī Allāh, *Tarjamāt al-Qur'ān: Fārsī, al-Mawsūm ba-Fath al-Rahmān* (Bombay: °Alī Bhā°ī Sharaf °Alī, n.d.). For the text of his translation, I studied Shāh Walī Allāh, *Qur'ān-i Majīd Mutarjam: Tarjama-yi Fārsī* (Lahore: Pāk Company, 2004). On the reception of his translation during his own times, there is seen in the studies on Walī Allāh a general opposition from the fundamentalist theologians. It seems that the older idea that the Qur'an cannot be rendered into any other language prevailed to some extent. See Freeland Abbott, "The Decline of the Mughal Empire and Shah Waliullah," *The Muslim World* 52, no. 2 (April 1962): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1962.tb02602.x>.

of a new public sphere centred on the Qur'an. The point that his influence made its way gradually is attested, to some extent, by the fact that it was only in the post-Mutiny period that we see the actual flowering of Qur'anic thought that was consciously engaging with Walī Allāh's thought either to support traditionalist positions or to dismiss modernist positions, or vice versa. Moreover, it was from the latter half of the nineteenth century that we observe a rapid increase in vernacular translations of the Qur'an. Mindful of these cautions, we study briefly what Walī Allāh had to offer in terms of his Qur'anic hermeneutics. Given his overall thought, it seems that he was revisiting the history of Islamic thought, both Qur'anic and Ḥadīth-based.⁶² However, it also appears that his works remained in the form of unfinished projects during his lifetime and that he left to posterity the never-ending task of interpreting his work in multiple ways, as earlier discussed on the issue of *asbāb al-nuzūl* in the Introduction.

In the case of Walī Allāh's Qur'anic scholarship, the obvious starting point is his concise statement of principles of interpreting the Qur'an as outlined in *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī 'Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*.⁶³ We begin with an analysis of the hermeneutical potential hidden in his principles. There are three aspects of *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* worth noting here. First, Walī Allāh distinguished the kinds of *'ilm* ("knowledge") that a reader gains when reflecting upon the Qur'an. There are five types of this *'ilm*: 1) *'ilm al-aḥkām* from the verses that deal with legal issues; 2) *'ilm al-jadal* (or *'ilm al-mukhāṣama*) from the verses that encapsulate debates with groups who opposed believers, such as *mushrikūn* ("polytheists"), *yahūd* ("Jews"), *naṣārā* ("Christians"), and

⁶² For Walī Allāh's reviewing the Islamic juristic tradition and its disagreements, see Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Misquoting Muḥammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 15-68. Brown's analysis is based on his study of Walī Allāh's *Al-Inṣāf fī Bayān Sabab al-Ikhtilāf*.

⁶³ For the text of *Fatḥ al-Khabīr*, I have used Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr: Ma' Fath al-Khabīr* (Delhi: Maṭba'at Muḥammadī, n.d.). The work *Fatḥ al-Khabīr* was completed around 1756. Baljon, *Shāh Walī Allāh Dihlawī*, 12.

munāfiqūn (“hypocrites”);⁶⁴ 3) *‘ilm tadhkīr bi-Ālā’ Allāh* from the verses that discuss Allāh’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and providence; 4) *‘ilm tadhkīr bi-ayyām Allāh* from the Qur’anic stories of people and nations for the reader’s guidance; 5) *‘ilm tadhkīr al-mawt wa-mā ba‘d al-mawt* from the verses that address matters related to death, eschatology, and the hereafter.⁶⁵

Second, Walī Allāh dealt with many of the issues that the Muslim tradition grappled with throughout its history in the field of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Here what seems unequivocal in Walī Allāh’s thought was his blunt acknowledgement of the challenges underlying any effort in the understanding of the Qur’an, given the scripture’s particular linguistic style and diction. In addition to the linguistic peculiarities of the Qur’an, he raised the issues related to *naskh*⁶⁶ and *asbāb al-nuzūl*⁶⁷ as debated in the genre of traditional sciences of the Qur’an. But here the striking thing is the particular linguistic fashion in which he discussed these issues. Walī Allāh’s articulation is somewhat equivocal in the sense that his approach led him to simultaneously earn titles of traditionalist and modernist in the period after the Mutiny when Muslim scholars were drawing upon him for the support of their interpretive positions. That is perhaps the reason why he was routinely appropriated by different schools of thought, who were otherwise opposed to each other. This is manifested in the post-1857 period when Muslim scholars, in their multiple milieux, felt the need to rethink the exegetical tradition.

Finally, Walī Allāh’s Qur’anic hermeneutics, despite its being in the form of a systematic approach to the question of how to understand the scripture, was clearly based on the idea of a

⁶⁴ These are references to the specific groups in the Prophet’s audiences in Mecca and Medina of the early seventh century, as mentioned in the Qur’an and early Muslim sources.

⁶⁵ For the study of *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* in this dissertation, I have used Shāh Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, trans. Sa‘īd Aḥmad al-Bālanfūrī (Damascus: Dār al-Ghawthānī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Qur’āniyya, 2008).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-68. Walī Allāh reduced the number of instances of *naskh* in the Qur’an to only five.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 69-76. He revived the discussion anew around al-Zarkashī’s Arabic phrase of *nazalat hadhih al-āya fī kadhā* as found in the latter’s *Al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. See Introduction, 13-15 in this dissertation.

divinely bestowed (*wahbī*) nature of the understanding of the Qur'an. What he emphasized from the beginning of his work was the claim that understanding the text of the Qur'an is actually a special gift of the Almighty and that he had been graced with this ability. He stressed that it is only through divine grace that a reader can understand the Qur'an the way he should.

In the light of the above brief introduction to Walī Allāh's principles of interpretation, there are two questions we need to deal with: What exactly was the opinion of Walī Allāh on the correct method of interpreting the Qur'an? Irrespective of the question of what he actually intended in his *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, how was he understood or received in later generations of Muslim scholars? The latter question will be addressed separately in the section below on the reception of pre-1857 works on the Qur'an.

Regarding the first question, we can draw certain conclusions from his short treatise. However, before we do that, it is important to take caution and remind ourselves that our understanding of his treatise will be limited unless we make it a full-length study based on his life, times, and other works. Having said this, we can make an effort to draw some provisional conclusions from his work. First, it seems that his attempt in *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* was part of his larger project of making the Qur'an the centre of Muslim reform, although he never articulated that project in any clear detail. Despite his stress on the Qur'an, he continued to reconcile with the Qur'an other sources of the Muslim tradition such as *Sīra*, Ḥadīth and *asbāb al-nuzūl*. His own tract *Fath al-Khabīr* is a proof of that. *Fath al-Khabīr* is a short writing in which he collected important exegetical ḥadīths and *asbāb al-nuzūl* for some selected Qur'anic verses. But despite this equivocality in his articulation, Walī Allāh, as an influential figure for the post-Mutiny period, definitively and vocally set a somewhat new precedent of rethinking the use of unreliable materials by earlier generations of exegetes. This fact has even led some modern

academic observers to place him in the category of the earliest of modernists in Muslim scholarship.⁶⁸ As we will see during the course of this dissertation, this trend of dismissing the record of early exegetical materials in the Muslim tradition reached its logical climax at the turn of the twentieth century. As cited in the Introduction to this current study, a good example was Shiblī Nuʿmānī who criticized the very basis of the Muslim exegetical tradition in his rebuttal of the earliest of pre-modern *tafsīr* works, such as those of Mujāhid bin Jabr, al-Suddī, and Muqātil bin Sulaymān, on whose reports later generations of exegetes had relied.⁶⁹

Second, Walī Allāh openly admitted the complexity of the task any interpreter of the Qurʾan was faced with, and acknowledged the apparent problems posed by the text, particularly its repetitions, breaks, and philological challenges. He also used the term *naẓm* in *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, but his idea of *naẓm* was not to establish the text’s coherence along the lines of pre-moderns like al-Mahāʾimī or in the manner of later generations of Deobandī *mufasssīrūn* (“commentators”). Qurʾanic *naẓm* to Walī Allāh was something related to the clear meaning of the Qurʾan. Thus, what he claimed was that his hermeneutical principles could lead to a clear understanding of Qurʾanic vocabulary and verses. In other words, committing to his linguistic principles would reveal the philological *naẓm* or clarity of the Qurʾan, including its eloquence.⁷⁰

Finally, as mentioned above, Walī Allāh regarded success in interpreting the Qurʾan as a gift bestowed by Allāh, thus keeping the door open to a mystical interpretation.⁷¹ Moreover, his stress on the *wahbī* nature of Qurʾanic understanding kept the possibility alive that some kind of

⁶⁸ Even academic observers like Johanna Pink seem to be mistakenly led, in my opinion, to construct a continuity of his thought with certain Muslim exegetes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pink, “Striving for New Exegesis of the Qurʾan,” 3-8.

⁶⁹ Shiblī Nuʿmānī, “ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān,” 33 (see Introduction, n. 3).

⁷⁰ Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, 89, 103.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

an access to what Allāh actually means by a particular verse is open to a class of selected believers, meaning that in some way they can be eligible for divine guidance in interpretive matters. This thinking had a direct or an indirect impact on new ways of establishing authority in interpretive matters, as we will see in the chapter on Thānawī.

Post-Walī Allāh Hermeneutics

Immediately after Walī Allāh, the major milestone in Qur'anic exegesis appeared in the shape of the works written by his sons: the Persian commentary *Fath al-°Azīz* written by his eldest son, °Abd al-°Azīz; *Muḍīḥ al-Qur'ān*, the Urdu translation and exegetical glosses by his son, °Abd al-Qādir; and *Tafsīr-i Rafī°*, the Urdu translation and exegetical glosses by Rafī° al-Dīn. As seen in their introductions, these commentators did not chart any special program of introducing new Qur'anic hermeneutics. For °Abd al-°Azīz, his major motivation seemed to expand the exegetical project initiated by his father.⁷² His work drew upon traditional resources of Qur'anic interpretation and strove to explain those aspects of the Qur'an which were difficult to understand for a lay reader. His *tafsīr* did not betray any stress on direct reading of the Qur'an and his actual praxis of interpretation seemed to privilege earlier exegetical opinions in understanding the scripture. A good site illustrating his exegetical method is his explanation of *al-ḥurūf al-muqatta°āt* in Q 2:1 where he engaged with the earlier *tafsīr* tradition and advised his readers to follow conventional positions.⁷³ For the brothers of °Abd al-°Azīz, in particular °Abd al-Qādir, the main reason to pen their work was similar to that of their father but they chose a different language as their medium of expression.⁷⁴ They exemplified the new trend of rendering

⁷² °Abd al-°Azīz, *Tafsīr-i °Azīzī*, vol. 1, 10-11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 154-160.

⁷⁴ Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 172-191.

the Qur'an into Urdu for a larger audience in Delhi and other Urdu speaking towns, but their translations could also be presented by their followers as "authentic" rendering of the Qur'an in situations where the Qur'an was being translated into regional varieties of Urdu such as Awrangābādī, Gujarātī, and Dakkanī. In his introduction, °Abd al-Qādir noted the need for his translation of the Qur'an in the local language and charted the linguistic method of his translation, in particular, his aim to be true to the original meanings of Qur'anic Arabic vocabulary and verses. His exegetical glosses were quite brief and were not meant to be written for all verses. °Abd al-Qādir would briefly add an explanatory note for the reader but on many occasions, his positions were in line with traditional Arabic commentaries. He made clear reference to traditional resources such as *asbāb al-nuzūl* and exegetical traditions to provide context to Qur'anic verses, whenever required by the text.

Another important milestone in the post-Walī Allāh period was *Tafsīr-i Mazharī*, the work of a student of Walī Allāh, Thanā° Allāh Pānīpatī (d. 1810). Pānīpatī was also a disciple of the famous Naqshbandī Sufi, Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Janān (d. 1781).⁷⁵ Like the sons of Walī Allāh, who were his contemporaries, he professed no radical or new program of Qur'anic hermeneutics. Some academic scholars who have investigated his voluminous work highlight the traditional character of his *tafsīr*.⁷⁶ They see his exegesis as resembling the classical works of *tafsīr*, such as of al-Baghawī (d. 1122), al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), and al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 981), the last of whom focused especially on the interpretation of verses dealing with legal issues. After Walī Allāh had shown his unease with the corpus of *isrā'iliyyāt*, Pānīpatī manifested this tendency as well to some

⁷⁵ Printed from Beirut under the title *Tafsīr al-Mazharī* (see above n. 39).

⁷⁶ See Ḥāfiẓ °Abd al-Rashīd Aẓhar, "Al-Dirāsa al-Muqārana bayna al-Tafsīr al-Mazharī wa Faṭḥ al-Bayān" (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 1997), 70. For Aẓhar, Pānīpatī's *tafsīr* tends to be similar to *Ma°ālim al-Tanzīl* of al-Baghawī (d. 1122).

degree. For instance, in the case of Q 2:101-102,⁷⁷ he did not merely rely on traditional explanations of the names Hārūt and Mārūt as referring to two angels; instead, Pānīpatī held that these words meant *al-qalb* (“heart”) and *al-rūḥ* (“soul”) respectively.⁷⁸ This way of interpreting the text was also in line with the older South Asian tendency to interpret Qur’anic verses for their esoteric and hidden meanings. Yet there was no conspicuous influence of Walī Allāh on Pānīpatī’s Qur’anic thought.

In addition to the circles of Qur’anic exegesis directly linked to Walī Allāh, there were other works of Qur’anic translation and exegesis after him that have been identified by the historians of *tafsīr*. Overall, the most conspicuous trend of the period was the writing of such works in Urdu. However, many of these translation works, including the one commissioned by John Gilchrist of Fort William College, remained in the form of manuscripts until this date. Some of them did eventually appear in print and attain a wider audience but that started happening only around the late 1820s.⁷⁹ Even ‘Abd al-Qādir’s work saw its publication around 1829 despite its having been written down circa 1790.⁸⁰ There is also definite evidence for the rising trend of writing in Urdu despite Persian being the official language till 1835. Works like the short treatise on the *tafsīr* of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1) by Sayyid Aḥmad Barēlwī (d. 1831), who is known for his *jihād* against the British and the Sikhs, exemplify these earlier attempts to write

⁷⁷ The verses Q 2:101-102 read: “When God sent them a messenger confirming the Scriptures they already had, some of those who had received the Scripture before threw the Book of God over their shoulders as if they had no knowledge, and followed what the evil ones had fabricated about the Kingdom of Solomon instead. Not that Solomon himself was a disbeliever; it was the evil ones who were disbelievers. They taught people witchcraft and what was revealed in Babylon to the two angels Harut and Marut. Yet these two never taught anyone without first warning him, ‘We are sent only to tempt– do not disbelieve.’”

⁷⁸ Pānīpatī, *Tafsīr al-Maḥzarī*, 123.

⁷⁹ Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur’ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 95-96; Shaṭṭārī, *Qur’ān-i Majīd kē Urdū Tarājum*, 188-203. Urdu translation of the Qur’an was completed in 1804 at the Fort William College. One of the manuscripts lies at Royal Asiatic Society, Calcutta.

⁸⁰ Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur’ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 175.

for a wider public.⁸¹ Here Aḥmad Barēlwī was also attempting, as part of his reform movement of Ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya, to build a narrative explanation of Qur'anic verses in a form that would take on a much more developed shape in the post-1857 period.

There were other works in Urdu before 1857 which might have been received well in the nineteenth century. However, the investigation in this dissertation shows that without having any institutional base, these works did not evidently exercise much influence in the later period to initiate debate on Qur'anic hermeneutics. Sharf al-Dīn reports two important works that continued to be printed even after 1857: 1) Urdu translation by Shāh Murād Allāh Anṣārī written in 1770; 2) *Tafsīr-i Ra'ūfi* by a Mujaddidī Sufi, Shāh Ra'ūf Aḥmad Rā'fat written between 1823 and 1832. It needs a separate study to see how such works fared in comparison to the ones written in some institutional frameworks or conceived as part of some reform movements. Moreover, a separate study on the place of the Qur'an in the public sphere of British India would be needed to bring to light any influence that these pre-Mutiny works might have on the subsequent decades.

Given the overall output of Qur'anic works in the post-Walī Allāh period, one cannot identify great shifts in approaches to Qur'anic interpretation before the Mutiny. The promise that Walī Allāhī hermeneutics embodied had yet to bear fruit. Eventually, this did happen in the post-Mutiny period but for reasons that derived mostly from multiple historical contexts and that owed less to Walī Allāh in a clear fashion. Discussing these multiple historical contexts is the subject of the next chapter. A provisional hypothesis in the area of Shāh Walī Allāh studies, which is not part of the aims of this dissertation, can be that he became relevant and influential

⁸¹ Nasīm °Uthmānī, *Urdū mēṇ Tafsīrī Adab*, 222-230. Nasīm °Uthmānī, through the use of direct quotations from the manuscript, provides a detailed study of Aḥmad Barēlwī's exegetical work.

more in the latter half of the nineteenth century when Muslim scholars felt the need to find precedents for their ideas in medieval and early modern thought.

Post-1857 Reception of Pre-Mutiny Qur'anic Thought

As laid out in the beginning of this chapter, a third important methodological task for this chapter is to gauge the reception of pre-1857 works on the Qur'an in the period after the Mutiny. The aim is to measure the impact of earlier Qur'anic thought on the later period. Some specific sources help us trace this reception history. First, there are Qur'an commentaries emerging from the latter half of the nineteenth century that sometimes refer to earlier exegesis in South Asia. Second, some scattered writings such as those on the history of Muslim education in India mention and discuss works on the Qur'an at some length, and some biographical and historical works written in the period after 1857 assess the value of the early work on the Qur'an in South Asia. Moreover, the histories of *tafsīr* studied above also at times hint at the after life of pre-Walī Allāh and post-Walī Allāh works. From these sources, a researcher can have some idea of the memory and consciousness of the South Asian exegetical heritage.

Among the various pre-Walī Allāh works, al-Mahā'imī's *tafsīr*, by all standards of analysis, best stood the test of time and merited great attention throughout the history of Muslim scholarship in the subcontinent. From its early appreciation in Muḥaddith Dihlawī's early seventeenth-century biographical work, *Akḥbār al-Akhiyār*, to its later recognition at the turn of the twentieth century by Qur'an commentators such as Ṭhānawī and Farāhī,⁸² al-Mahā'imī's *tafsīr* was regarded as an established example that demonstrated the coherence of the Qur'an, in addition to highlighting its mystical dimensions. Building on the larger Muslim scholarly

⁸² Detailed studies of Ṭhānawī and Farāhī will be presented in Chapters Four and Five respectively.

tradition of impressing the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an on Muslim readers,⁸³ al-Mahā'imī continued to serve as a regional precedent in the South Asian exegetical tradition that could be easily relied on as a source of Islamic heritage in times of any social or hermeneutical need, as will be seen when we study particular Qur'anic projects in British India.

Apart from al-Mahā'imī's commentary, available sources also discuss several other works that remained relevant in the thought of Muslim commentators. Chief among those are: al-Bukhārī's *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (d. 933 AH) for its imagining Qur'an's *tafsīr* as the function of the Prophet's traits;⁸⁴ Fayḍī' *Sawāṭi' al-Ilhām* (d. 1005 AH) for its innovativeness but within the constraints of the pre-modern *tafsīr* tradition;⁸⁵ Abd al-Ṣamad Qannawjī's *Thawāqīb al-Tanzīl fī Anārat al-Tā'wīl* for its creative use of classical *tafsīr*;⁸⁶ *Al-Tafsīrāt al-Aḥmadiyya* by Mullā Aḥmad Jīwan Jawnpūrī (d. 1718), who is portrayed as a tutor of Aurangzeb, and whose commentary played a role in entrenching Ḥanafī fiqh during the time of the Mughal Emperor;⁸⁷ and al-Kashmīrī's *Zubdat al-Tafāsīr*, which was seen as an important precedent for dismissing heretical positions on religious matters.⁸⁸

⁸³ The *i'jāz* ("inimitability") doctrine in the Muslim intellectual tradition refers to the Qur'an's miraculous qualities. A verse that has often provoked Muslim thinking in this regard is Q 2:23: "If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it— enlist whatever supporters you have other than God— if you truly [think you can]." A good summary of classical positions on *i'jāz* of the Qur'an and its relation to *naẓm* feature of the scripture can be found in Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 10-19 (see Introduction, n. 44).

⁸⁴ Raḥmān °Alī, *Tadhkira-yi °Ulamā°-yi Hind* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, n.d.), 138; Al-Lakḥnawī, *Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir*, vol. 4, 223; Manāẓir Aḥsan Gilānī, *Hindūstān mēñ Musalmānoñ kā Niẓām-i Ta°līm o Tarbiyat* (Hyderabad: Maṭba° Intizāmī, n.d.) vol. 2, 309.

⁸⁵ The reception of Fayḍī's work was probably driven by its being perceived as an example of Muslim creativity of the past in the time of a perceived decline in the post-Mutiny period. See Shiblī Nu°mānī, *Shi°r al-°Ajam*, vol. 3 (Azamgarh: Maṭba° Ma°ārif, n.d.), 52-58; Gilānī, *Niẓām-i Ta°līm o Tarbiyat*, vol. 2, 285-294; Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Ḥayāt-i °Abd al-Ḥaqq* (Delhi: Nadwat al-Muṣannifīn, 1964), 242, 353.

⁸⁶ Qidwā°ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 91-97.

⁸⁷ Qidwā°ī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 269-270; Lāhorī, *Khazīnat al-Aṣfiyā°*, vol. 6, 365.

⁸⁸ Al-Lakḥnawī, *Nuzhat al-Khawāṭir*, vol. 5, 406; Faqīr Muḥammad Jihlamī, *Ḥadā°iq al-Ḥanafiyya* (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, n.d.), 421.

In the light of the above gleanings from this reception history, there are a few substantial elements to be found that had an impact on Muslim Qur'anic thought in the post-1857 period. All this review indicates is an imagined continuity with the earlier Qur'anic scholarship in the region. We can learn from this reception history a few important points about the pre-1857 *tafsīr* and translations works. First, the post-1857 works that reviewed the earlier *tafsīr* viewed the pre-Walī Allāh's intellectual history as a continuation of the classical Arabic *tafsīr* tradition. Therefore, it looked back at these earlier literary efforts as preserving the Arabic exegetical tradition of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, al-Suyūṭī, and others. Second, through linking with this heritage, it served as a continuation of some kind of orthodoxy in matters of interpretation of the Qur'an. Thus, writers in the post-Mutiny period viewed the innovative attempts of Fayḍī as not deviating from the established path of interpreting the divine word. Third, it transferred to later generations the idea of *naẓm* and *rabṭ-i āyāt* to be appropriated in the new circumstances.

We can study the impact of works by Walī Allāh and his family in terms of the question of how their work was received. In principle, these questions require a separate study in detail. Here my objective is to outline the broad details that manifest the significance of Walī Allāh and his family for the later period. Regarding the question of the reception of Walī Allāh's *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, the answer lies in the universal acceptance of his thinking by most schools of thought that developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century in British India. My chapters on Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī manifest this facet of Walī Allāh to some degree. Most schools, whether labelled traditionalists, modernists, or fundamentalists, seemed to embrace Walī Allāh as the authoritative representative of their hermeneutical principles. Aḥmad Khān engaged with Walī Allāh at length in his *Al-Taḥrīr fī 'Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, agreeing with him on some occasions and disagreeing on others (see Chapter Three). Likewise, Deoband's patron, Thānawī, consumed

the ideas of Walī Allāh, his family, and Pānīpatī in the introduction to his *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qurʾān* and in his commentary as well. For Thānawī, in principle, there was no need for his work in the wake of the already available translations and commentaries emanating from the pens of the family of Shāh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz (see Chapter Four). Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, of the Ahl-i Ḥadīth school, wrote his *Iksīr fī ʿUṣul al-Tafsīr* as an extension of Walī Allāh’s *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* and in many ways structured his work according to the division of topics in the Qur’an suggested by Walī Allāh (see Chapter Six). Similarly, we see Farāhī evidently arguing from Walī Allāh’s views on *asbāb al-nuzūl* to articulate his somewhat similar position (see Chapter Five).

The reception history of this literary output in the tradition of Walī Allāh and his family highlights three observations. In the first place, their translations motivated others to render the divine word into various vernacular languages, not just Urdu. This perhaps marked the beginning of the dilution of an Arabic tradition of exegesis in South Asia. In addition, the now available opportunity to translate the Qur’an opened the way for controversies on what it meant to translate authentically. Many religious scholars of various post-Mutiny schools of thought, including notably the Dār al-ʿUlūm at Deoband, considered the translations by Walī Allāh’s family as the bench mark of a “correct” translation of the Qur’an. Finally, authors such as Pānīpatī in the imagined Walī Allāhī tradition were seen by traditionalists as “custodians” of an “authentic” pre-modern exegetical tradition despite their novelties on occasions. As the chapters on the individual exegetes will also show, the influence of Walī Allāhī tradition seemed to have manifested more in its being appropriated to seek support in inter-school polemics than in its being a basis to develop a methodology to interpret the Qur’an.

Chapter Two

Post-1857 British India and the Qur'an A Study of Multiple Contexts

Before we enter into the world of post-Mutiny British India and attempt to trace the currents of thought surrounding Qur'anic interpretation through key case studies, it is pertinent to acquaint ourselves with various contexts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which the ideas about how to understand the Qur'an were evolving. In this chapter, our aim is to chart the picture of these larger milieux in North India and the underlying processes that influenced Muslim Qur'anic thought in the period under study. In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss in detail the ways these factors had a specific bearing on the development of hermeneutical ideas related to the Qur'an and how Muslim responses had a reciprocating impact on these contexts. It is important to note that I am writing about those historical currents that had some degree of influence specifically on the evolution of Muslim Qur'anic thought; in some cases, the impact was substantial, and in others, it was not negligible. In order to further develop our knowledge about the historical processes involved, this chapter is meant to provide solid initial foundations for future research studies in these multiple areas.

Europeans and the Qur'an

One of the most conspicuous forces that had a direct consequence for the Muslim Qur'anic thought that developed in post-Mutiny British India was the European work on the holy scripture of Islam, work which was steadily gathering momentum from the beginning of the nineteenth century. European scholars, whose writings on many occasions were available to

educated Muslims in India, were working in different, but sometimes overlapping, capacities.¹ This raises the important question of why we should include works in our study that were emanating from mainland Europe, and not simply works produced in British India. However, the genealogies of the ideas under study here and the cosmopolitan networks between scholars in Europe and in British India make it clear that merely studying the works published in colonial India is insufficient for understanding external influences on South Asian Qur'anic scholarship. Before we assess the nature of the European thought and the projects involving the study of the Qur'an and Islam in the nineteenth century, it is pertinent to give a brief look at the earlier history of Christian studies of Islam and the Qur'an.

European, mostly Christian, work on the Qur'an has a long history. Historians characteristically begin by acknowledging the twelfth-century Latin translation of the Qur'an by Robert of Ketton (fl. 1136-57)² as a milestone in this episode of European intellectual history.³ A broad look at the studies focused on pre-modern Christian engagements with the Qur'an brings to the fore two elements of pre-modern Christian readings of Muslim scripture.⁴ First, those readings were rooted in the polemics against the whole Muslim enterprise. At the core of these

¹ The general term "Orientalist" is often used to denote the Europeans working on Islam during the colonial period. But given the nature of these European works on the Qur'an and the different groups of scholars working on it, this blanket term is not very useful. However, at a more general level, using the epithet "Orientalist" can be acceptable for practical purposes, for instance, in the first sense in which Edward Said used it: "Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient – this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism." However, it is beyond the scope of this section to conceptualize Orientalism at more a mega-level, as Said tried to do. I would propose that for understanding these works, instead of using the ambiguous and controversial epithet "Orientalist", it is useful to consider various types of these works as "European works and responses to intellectual Islam" as confronted by the networks of European scholars. For Said's view of Orientalism and the quote above, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 2.

² He was an English astronomer and priest based in Pamplona (Spain).

³ See Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁴ Burman, *Reading the Qur'ān*, 60-87. Burman built his work on Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

polemics were the religious ideas that the Qur'an was a false scripture and that the Prophet Muḥammad was not an authentic and credible prophet in the Abrahamic tradition. Second, it was a larger interest in philology, as part of the biblical humanist movement of the time, that eventually motivated scholars in Latin Christendom to engage with Qur'anic diction and style. These two currents remained strong in various forms and in varied contexts, even in the Indian sub-continent during the pre-modern period. Polemics against the Qur'an were a dominant theme in debates between Jesuits and members of the *'ulamā'* at the Mughal Emperor Akbar's court in the latter half of the sixteenth century.⁵ As will be discussed below, these two elements predominantly persisted in new forms in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Europeans in their various capacities were writing on the Qur'an.

When we come to study the modern European work on the Qur'an, the above features of the pre-modern Christian tradition of reading the Islamic scripture help us categorize, in two ways, the kinds of persons involved, particularly in terms of the groups they were associated with and the projects they undertook to study the Qur'an and Islam. First, starting from the late eighteenth century and escalating in the early half of the nineteenth century, various groups of evangelical missionaries who pursued active proselytization were equipping themselves with tracts on Islam and the Qur'an.⁶ Included in this group were scholar-administrators such as William Muir (1819-1905) who were writing works on Islam as part of their own personal

⁵ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginnings to AD 1707* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 173.

⁶ Based on the policy of non-interference with native populations on religious matters, the East India Company, in general, discouraged the Christian missionary activity in their sphere of influence. Gradually this policy was relaxed, and the missionary activity expanded to North India from other parts in India. Early missionary attempts in the eastern districts of Gangetic core can be seen in the activities of the Company's military chaplain, Henry Martyn (1781-1812). See Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1993), 76-102. For early missionary activity in India during the rule of the Company, see E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

missionary agendas and of their commitment to supporting other missionaries in their evangelical efforts.⁷ Muir supported such missionaries as the German Pietist, Carl G. Pfander (1803-1868), who was the chief Christian protagonist at the historic disputation (*munāzara*) with Muslim scholars at Agra in 1854.⁸ In addition to the support he received from Muir, Pfander himself was the author of some famous tracts on the Bible, Islam, and the Qur'an as part of the Christian-Muslim polemics of the day, including his famous writing, *Mīzān al-Ḥaqq*.⁹ Other Christian proselytizers themselves produced considerable amounts of literature from different locations in colonial India.¹⁰ Also included in this group were new Muslim converts to Christianity, such as an oft-noted but somewhat obscure ʿImād al-Dīn Lāhiz, whose writing on the Qur'an had an immense effect on agitating Muslim minds to throw themselves into inter-faith polemics.¹¹

We can add to the above category of proselytizing Christian works on the Qur'an other strands of inter-faith polemics as well, such as the work and activities of Hindu reform movements.¹² Muslims were not only engaging with Christians for such disputations, but were also confronting disputations about Islam from movements such as Arya Samaj, emanating from

⁷ For the biographies, including evangelical upbringings, of William Muir and his elder brother, John Muir, see Avril A. Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010). Unless named in full when mentioned in comparison to John Muir, Muir as a surname in this chapter and dissertation refers to William Muir.

⁸ Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 226-262.

⁹ Originally published in German, the book was translated in different languages, including Persian (1835). For the English translation, see Carl G. Pfander, *Balance of Truth*, trans. R.H. Weakley (London: Church Missionary House, 1866).

¹⁰ Sājīd Asad Allāh, "Barr-i Saghīr mēn Masīḥī Skālarz kā Pēsh kardah Qurʾānī Liṭrēchar, 1837-1947" (PhD diss., Islamiyya University, Bahawalpur, Pakistan, 2009).

¹¹ He attended the famous Christian-Muslim disputation, the Great Debate, at Agra in 1854. He later converted to Christianity and wrote a number of anti-Islamic and anti-Qur'anic tracts, such as, *Tanqīd al-Qurʾān*. Asad Allāh, "Barr-i Saghīr mēn Masīḥī Skālarz," 72-76.

¹² See Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

the Punjab, whose founder, Swāmī Dayānand Saraswatī (d. 1883), left not only a key work that dealt with understanding the Qur'an,¹³ but also contributed to Hindu-Muslim polemical exchanges like the historic 1876 disputation in the North Indian district of Shāh Jahānpūr, previously a Mughal town, north of Lucknow.¹⁴ Saraswatī's followers took up the precedent set by their founder and advanced these inter-faith polemics in the subsequent decades. In addition to Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj, originating from Bengal, also produced literature on Islam and the Qur'an, such as the first translation of the Qur'an in the Bengali language by Girish Chandra Sen.¹⁵ Moreover, larger parallel religious worldviews generated in these movements, like the concept of the unity of all religions (*waḥdat al-adyān*), in due course had a direct bearing on Muslim worldviews, an outcome of their renewed engagements with the Qur'an. All these inter-faith exchanges and polemics motivated larger numbers of Muslim scholars to write commentaries on the Qur'an that addressed theological and social issues raised in these debates and in Hindu works. What this meant in terms of evolving Muslim Qur'anic hermeneutics will be the subject of later chapters.

Second, there was the larger fraternity of European, mostly German, scholars of Islam, whose works were available to both Muslim and British scholars in colonial India. As their works reveal, the members of this larger fraternity were engaging with each other in their intellectual capacities. Muir built his work on that of the German scholar, Gustav Weil (d.

¹³ For the English translation of the work, see Swāmī Dayānand Saraswatī, *Satyarth Prakash*, trans. Durga Prasad (Lahore: Virjanand Press, 1908). Originally published in 1875, Saraswatī's work had a full chapter devoted to the criticism of Islam and the Qur'an.

¹⁴ The debate occurred between Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotwī (d. 1877) of Deoband seminary, Swāmī Dayānand Saraswatī (d. 1883) of the Arya Samaj movement, and a Christian priest named Father Knowles. See the report of the debate by a Muslim reporter, Fakhr al-Ḥasan, *Mubāḥatha-yi Shāhjahānpūr* (Delhi: Maṭba' Mujtabā'ī, 1891); For an academic study of the debate, see SherAli Tareen, "The Polemic of Shahjahanpur: Religion, Miracles, and History," *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 49-67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23643924>.

¹⁵ Mufakkhar Hussain Khan, "A History of Bengali Translations of the Holy Qur'ān," *The Muslim World* 72, no. 2 (April 1982): 129-136.

1889),¹⁶ while the German Semitist, Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), author of the seminal work in the history of modern Qur'anic studies, *Geschichte des Qorans* (1860), was developing his own thesis in argument with Muir's previous work.¹⁷ However, it is important to note that this larger fraternity was not uniform in its character. The main group from mainland Europe belonged to the Jewish Reform Movement, one of whose major aims was to study Islam as a means of positioning Judaism against Christianity. This movement read Islam as a creative product emerging out of Judaism, and its proponents presented this combined Judeo-Islamic heritage in order to launch an attack on nineteenth-century Christianity.¹⁸ In the end their work was a kind of Jewish reconciliation with Islam but with a condescending glance on the Muslim religion. Moreover, these works continued the pre-modern Christian tradition of studying Qur'anic philology in an attempt to throw new light on the world of Semitic languages including Arabic.¹⁹ More importantly, these works were ultimately used in polemics by their consumers in British India. Abraham Geiger, a key figure in the Jewish Reform Movement, provided Christian

¹⁶ William Muir published his first volume in 1858 on the life of the Prophet Muḥammad, which also included discussions related to the Qur'an. The work had already been published in slightly different format and with somewhat different material in *Calcutta Review* in the previous decades. On the discussion of sources, including his borrowing from Weil and others, see William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet and History of Islam, to the Era of the Hegira*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858), i-cv.

¹⁷ Originally written in 1856 as a dissertation in Latin and later published in expanded German edition, the work was subsequently updated by Nöldeke's colleagues and students. It has also been translated into Arabic and English. For its English translation, see Theodor Nöldeke et al, *The History of the Qur'ān*, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Nöldeke was engaging with Muir's ideas on the chronology of Qur'anic verses and suras. The fact that these German works were available to Muslim scholars in British India, either directly or indirectly, is attested in the writings of Muslim religious scholars. See Shiblī Nu'mānī, "Yūrap awr Qur'ān kē 'Adīm al-Ṣiḥa honē kā Da'wā," in *Maqālāt-i Shiblī*, ed. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, vol. 1 (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifin, 1999), 64-69. In the case of Nöldeke's seminal work, Nu'mānī had it translated in Urdu as well. See Letter of Shiblī Nu'mānī to Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, Bombay, 20 August 1913, in *Makātīb-i Shiblī*, ed. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: Maṭba'at-yi Ma'ārif, 1928), 42.

¹⁸ Susannah Heschel, "Constructions of Jewish Identity through Reflections on Islam," in *Faithful Narratives: Historians, Religions, and the Challenge of Objectivity*, eds. Andrea Sterk and Nina Caputo (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2014), 169-184; Susannah Heschel, "German-Jewish Scholarship on Islam as a Tool of De-Orientalizing Judaism," *New German Critique* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2012), 91-107. doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-1677282.

¹⁹ Andrew Rippin, introduction to *The Qur'an: Formative Interpretation*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999), xi.

missionaries in colonial India with a sophisticated argument in his *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen?*²⁰ He claimed that a significant portion of what the Prophet Muḥammad presented in the Qur'an was borrowed from the Old Testament.

Although much of this literature, produced in colonial India and Europe, echoed the same tendencies of pre-modern polemics and had a similar stress on philology, a key added element was a new methodology of studying Islam. In this modern European study of Islam and its foundational texts, the emphasis was to rely more on directly reading Arabic manuscripts, such as the early biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad including the works of his early biographers, al-Wāqidī (d. 823), Ibn Hishām (d. 833), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). These works, available in princely libraries in colonial India and elsewhere in Europe via Arab lands, enabled Europeans to come up with a more sophisticated argument against the Islamic enterprise, and also to study Islam directly through primary sources.

Having taken stock of the different historical forces bearing on the understanding of the Qur'an, we can acquaint ourselves with what exactly the challenge was that these works posed to Muslim scholarship in colonial India. One of the key challenges to traditional Muslim views on the Qur'an was European criticism of its structure and arrangement.²¹ European scholars, working in British India and elsewhere, were to a great extent unanimous that Muslim scripture

²⁰ For its English translation, see Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, trans. F.M. Young (Madras, 1898). The translator's preface is interesting for our current discussion. It reads: "I undertook to translate this Prize Essay by the Rabbi Geiger at the request of the Rev. Gr. A. Lefroy, the Head of the Cambridge Mission at Delhi, who thought that an English translation of the book would be of use to him in his dealings with Muhammadans."

²¹ Traditional Muslim views on the structure and style of the Qur'an are diverse in their own right. But that diversity was part of Muslims' own "discursive tradition," if we borrow the term from the anthropologist, Talal Asad. Diversity within this tradition had little bearing on the doubts about the integrity of the Qur'an as a foundational text. In contrast, the European criticism was produced in different contexts, and in a manner intended to malign the integrity of the Qur'an. It was accordingly seen as a hostile challenge and not as an opportunity for intellectual dialogue. For the term "discursive tradition," see Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14.

was simply a set of disjointed verses. Their key underlying argument was the idea that the Qur'an reflected the Prophet's changing political manoeuvres in his contemporary settings of Mecca and Medina, and that the Islamic scripture was not divinely inspired.²² In this regard, Muir can be seen, to a considerable extent, as a representative European critic of the Qur'an and the career of the Prophet. A few quotes from him portray key elements of the European perceptions of Muslims' holy text.

Muir's work on the Qur'an was aimed at establishing that Muslim scripture itself stood as a witness to the truth of Christian scriptures. While making his point, he also commented on the arrangement and style of the Qur'an:

But the Coran has this drawback, that we are never sure of the context. While some Surahs, especially the shorter chapters, the lyrics, and narrative portions, are more or less complete, and presumably in the form in which they were first promulgated, there prevails throughout the great body of the work an utter disregard of chronological sequence.²³

He further wrote:

There are not only startling breaks and gaps, but later passages not unfrequently precede the earlier. The fragments have been set with artless simplicity. The materials were too sacred to be dressed by human hand, and so we have this tangled mass – a mosaic of which the parts are so rudely and fortuitously put together that the design is often marred and unintelligible.²⁴

The idea that Muir's assessment of the Qur'an's structure and style was representative of larger European scholarship is corroborated by other key European works on the Qur'an of the

²² The allied topic of the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad was equally relevant to the questions of the authenticity of the Qur'an and of how one should understand it as a religious and historical document. This question of the biographies of the Prophet in British India will be dealt with later in this chapter.

²³ William Muir, *The Corân: Its Composition and Teaching, and the Testimony It Bears to the Holy Scriptures* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 40. The cited revised edition is based on Muir's earlier text entitled *The Testimony Borne by the Corân to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures*, published in 1855 at Agra.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

nineteenth century. Nöldeke's remarks were equally relevant in the milieu of inter-faith controversies. He noted:

Some surahs are well arranged, having not only a proper beginning but also an appropriate ending. Generally, however, the diction of the Koran is rather inconsistent, so that the context is not always clear; there is the danger that related parts can easily become separated.²⁵

Nöldeke further commented:

...Incidentally, Muhammad often put together, or joined, Koranic passages that originated from different periods. In some instances, this is very obvious while in others we may suspect it; in still other instances these connections may remain hidden from us.²⁶

Similarly, the American Presbyterian missionary stationed in Ludhiyāna in eastern Punjab,

E. M. Wherry (d. 1927) wrote with regard to the repetitions in the Qur'an:

As to the matter of [my explanatory] notes, the reader will perceive occasional repetition. This is due in part to the repetitions of the [Qur'anic] text, and partly in order to call special attention to certain doctrines of the Quran, e.g., its testimony to the genuineness and credibility of the Christian Scriptures current in the days of Muhammad; the evidence it affords to its own character as a fabrication...The need of emphasizing facts of this kind has grown out of the attempt of certain apologists for Islam to ignore these unpleasant truths.²⁷

Stationed in Egypt, the author of a well-known English-Arabic lexicon, Edward Lane, noted:

Read in this order, the Kuran is an unintelligible jumble...You can trace no development of mind or doctrine in the present arrangement; it is indeed a confused mass of 'endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement, most crude, incondite.' But scholars have long discovered certain signs of a true order – several kinds of evidence by which a chronological arrangement of the Kuran may be attempted. These are - (1.) The *references to historical events* in the Kuran, as identified by tradition. A much more important test is (2.) the *style*; for a distinct development can be traced in the rime, in the length of verses, and in the words employed. And then

²⁵ Nöldeke, *History of the Qur'ān*, 25.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ E.M. Wherry, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Qur'ān: Comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse, with Additional Notes and Emendations*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner & Co., 1882), vii. For Sale's eighteenth-century English translation (1734) of the Qur'an, see George Sale, *The Koran: Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed, to which is Fixed a Preliminary Discourse* (London: J. Wilcox, 1776).

there is (3.) the *matter* test, based on what we know of Mohammad's life, from which we can argue a certain change in his preaching at Mekka, and still more when, from addressing idolaters in his birthplace, he came to preach to Jews and Christians at Medina. The danger of this last test is that each man forms his own theory of Mohammad's mental and religious growth, and may arrange the soorahs in accordance with that theory. [italics in the original]²⁸

As we will study in later chapters, Muir's and other European works on the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet became the reason for many exegetes of the Qur'an writing in the post-Mutiny period to defend the integrity of the Qur'an and seek to establish it. This had a direct and cumulative impact on the way Muslim commentators came to develop principles of hermeneutics for their scripture in these new contexts.

Fully addressing the question of why Europeans, particularly Christian missionaries, were expecting some kind of coherence and more developed structure in the Qur'an would need a separate investigation from that carried out here. The question entails the larger issue of literary approaches privileged by these nineteenth-century European readers in studying literary and religious texts in general. The question was also linked with how evangelical missionaries, including the Scottish ones, in British India perceived the Bible as a religious and literary text. In some ways, this question, as discussed in one of the sections below, was linked to the attitudes of these Christian missionaries in colonial contexts to the methods of historical criticism (also sometimes called higher criticism or biblical criticism). In general, as the exchange between William Muir and his brother John Muir suggests, Scottish missionaries were reading the Bible as a "smooth" text that was not an incoherent mass of historical and religious discourses.²⁹ But

²⁸ Edward W. Lane, *Selections from the Kurán* (London: Trübner & Co., 1879), cii-ciii. Originally published in 1843, the work was available in colonial India.

²⁹ Powell, *Scottish Orientalists*, 258-60. For the discussion on some elements of tension in reading the Bible in the wake of the rising biblical criticism, see Andrew L. Drummond and James Bulloch, "The Rise of Biblical Criticism," in *The Church in Victorian Scotland, 1843-1874* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 240-265. For a basic discussion of the issue of the coherence of the Bible, see Patrick Collinson, "The Coherence of the Text: How it

whatever the answer to this question, the intensity of Muslim fascination with the Qur'an's coherence that arose in British India was the product of the larger criticism by non-Muslims of the structure and style of the Qur'an.³⁰ In this regard, post-1857 Qur'an commentators, while attempting to combat this intellectual challenge, found their starting points in the classical Arabic rhetoric that had given birth to the ideas of the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an and its *naẓm*, as mentioned in medieval and early modern Arabic *tafāsīr* as well as in South Asian pre-Mutiny Qur'an commentaries, such as that of al-Mahā'imī. These ideas will be discussed in later chapters.

Like European scholarly works on the Qur'an, Christian polemical literature expressed similar problems with the Qur'an in terms of its structure, in particular its arrangement and style. Doubts about the integrity of the composition and preservation of Muslim scripture during the reigns of early caliphs led Christian critics to treat the Qur'an not as a smooth and stable text. The literature springing from Christian missionary circles and Christian-Muslim disputations also manifested certain patterns of criticism directed towards the Qur'an. The topics in these disputations could be theological, Christological, or prophetological³¹ in Muslim contexts, but on many occasions polemical exchanges did involve the issue of the purity of the Qur'an and how to understand it rationally. In short, Christian criticism of the Qur'an in the contexts of these disputations was a multi-layered phenomenon. Among the many issues that this literature raised, two points stood prominent.³² First, the originality of the Qur'an was questioned. The literature

Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England," in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, ed. W.P. Stephens (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 84-108.

³⁰ For the rise of this trend in the larger Muslim world, including South Asia, see Mustansir Mir, "The Sūra as a Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'ān Exegesis," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, eds. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (1993; repr. London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 211-224.

³¹ Here the term "prophetology" refers to a specific view of the nature of the Prophet Muḥammad in terms of his person and prophethood.

³² Asad Allāh, "Barr-i Saghīr mēn Masīḥī Skālarz," 220-275.

treated the Qur'an as comprised of borrowings from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, as argued by Geiger's work. Second, debates in the Muslim scholarly tradition about *naskh* of Qur'anic verses gave European critics ammunition to argue that the Qur'an was a very concocted text. On this basis they tried to substantiate the claim that it was the product of the Prophet's mind as he tried to grapple with changing political and social situations in Mecca and Medina. This criticism in turn had a clear impact on Muslim exegetical thinking, as our analysis below will further reveal.

Imagining the Prophet and Interpreting the Qur'an

The history of the interpretation of the Qur'an reflects an abiding concern with the relationship between the life of the Prophet (*sīra*) and the Qur'an. The Muslim tradition and the Qur'an itself view this relationship as an underlying dynamic that influences any understanding of the Qur'an.³³ However, the main question that has continuously shaped the discourses regarding this issue, for both Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, is that of what kind of relationship historically existed between the two. As noted in the above section, one European strand of thought held that the Qur'an was the result of the Prophet's political manoeuvres to spread and negotiate his message; proponents of this view read the Qur'an in this light. Thus, it was the changing conceptions which scholars of the time had of the life of the Prophet and the nature of his prophethood that had a continuous impact on the ways this relationship was conceived in Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship. These various conceptions made an impact on Muslim Qur'anic thought prominently in two scenarios.

³³ See Wim Raven, "Sīra and the Qur'ān," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed May 17, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00185; W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

First, European works on the biography of the Prophet, as an allied area related to the study of the Qur'an, agitated the minds of Muslim biographers of the Prophet and exegetes in colonial India. This agitation made them view their prophet's life from new angles.³⁴ Muir pointed to this underlying relationship in the preface of his *Life of Mahomet* published in 1858: "In each chapter, I have sought to illustrate the statements of [*Sīra*] tradition by the contemporaneous revelation of the Coran."³⁵ The ways one's view of the Prophet's biography impacted Qur'anic interpretation was illustrated in the case of the story of cranes in the Qur'an at Q 17:73-74,³⁶ Q 22:52,³⁷ and Q 53:19-23.³⁸ According to the famous tenth-century Qur'an commentator and historian, al-Ṭabarī:

When the Messenger of God saw how his tribe turned their backs on him and was grieved to see them shunning the message he had brought to them from God, he longed in his soul that something would come to him from God which would reconcile him with his tribe. With his love for his tribe and his eagerness for their welfare it would have delighted him if some of the difficulties which they made for him could have been smoothed out, and he debated with himself and fervently desired such an outcome.

Then God revealed: "By the Star when it sets, your comrade does not err, nor is he deceived; nor does he speak out of (his own) desire ..." And when he came to the words: "Have you thought upon al-Lat and al-°Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?" Satan cast on his tongue, because of his inner debates and what he desired to bring to his people, the words: "These are the high-flying cranes; verily their intercession is accepted with approval."

³⁴ Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³⁵ Also see Muir, *Corân: Its Composition and Teaching*, 7-43 for his view on the relationship between the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet.

³⁶ Q 17:73-74: "73 [Prophet], the disbelievers tried to tempt you away from what We revealed to you, so that you would invent some other revelation and attribute it to Us and then they would have taken you as a friend. 74 If We had not made you stand firm, you would almost have inclined a little towards them."

³⁷ Q 22:52: "We have never sent any messenger or prophet before you [Muhammad] into whose wishes Satan did not insinuate something, but God removes what Satan insinuates and then God affirms His message. God is all knowing and wise."

³⁸ Q 53:19-23: "19 [Disbelievers], consider al-Lat and al-°Uzza, 20 and the third one, Manat —21 are you to have the male and He the female? 22That would be a most unjust distribution! —23 these are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them. These people merely follow guesswork and the whims of their souls, even though guidance has come to them from their Lord."

When Quraysh heard this, they rejoiced and were happy and delighted at the way in which he spoke of their gods, and they listened to him, while the Muslims, having complete trust in their Prophet in respect of the messages which he brought from God, did not suspect him of error, illusion, or mistake.³⁹

European biographers of the Prophet, like Muir, considered this story to be true because no Muslim would dare to concoct it. Moreover, it was a reliable narrative, they thought, because it had been reported by acclaimed biographers of the Prophet in the early period.⁴⁰ The history of Muslim response to this issue throws light on changing Muslim responses to the story and what it meant in terms of Qur'anic interpretation. Pre-modern Muslim scholarly tradition had actually been divided on the nature and historicity of this incident. As far as Muslim scholars in India were concerned, until near the end of the 18th century, the famous Ḥanafī exegete and Walī Allāh's student, Thanā' Allāh Pānīpatī accepted this tradition from al-Ṭabarī in line with some early Muslim opinions on the issue. Pānīpatī was trying to reconcile the traditions regarding Q 22:52 and was not altogether denying every report. He thus tended to interpret the related Qur'anic verses based on the medieval exegetical tradition.⁴¹ But most Muslim commentators writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were against accepting this tradition and consequently opposed the theological and prophetological implications of the traditional reading of the story.⁴² Ṭhānawī, who will be treated in Chapter Four, in his characteristic style passed over the related verses without discussing or mentioning the traditions. Another instance of this relationship between understanding the life of the Prophet and interpreting the Qur'an can

³⁹ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tā'riḫ al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald, vol. 6 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 108.

⁴⁰ William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet and History of Islam, to the Era of the Hegira*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858), 153.

⁴¹ Pānīpatī, *Tafsīr al-Maḥzarī*, vol. 6, 254-257.

⁴² Ashraf 'Alī Ṭhānawī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān* (Lahore: Maktaba Raḥmāniyya, 2011), 2:527-528; 3:476-477.

be seen in the discussions pertaining to the re-ordering of Qur'anic suras in the light of different readings of the Prophet's life. It can be illustrated in some European attempts to arrange the suras according to their supposed time of revelation during the life of the Prophet. Nöldeke arranged some Qur'anic suras as early, middle, and later Meccan suras, and others as Medinan suras. This European scholarly intervention was not without implications for Muslim scholars. Around the turn of the twentieth century, one notable Muslim translator of the Qur'an, Mirzā Abū al-Faḍl, seriously encouraged chronological reading of Qur'anic suras, in the light of the orders of suras recommended by al-Suyūṭī and Nöldeke, for better understanding of the text.⁴³

In the end, both evangelizing Europeans and their Muslim respondents ended up writing competing biographies of the founders of Christianity and Islam, and understanding the evolution of religion in terms of the movement of world history as governed by the divine hand, from their respective Christian and Islamic points of view. And on many occasions, a new *sīra* and prophetology provided the sub-text on which an interpretation of the Qur'an was conceived. In such ways, did the work of Europeans' act as an extra-Islamic factor that had a bearing on South Asian Muslim interpretations of the life of the Prophet.

The second scenario was the intra-Sunni sectarian polemics in colonial India that gave rise to new biographies and related prophetologies of the Prophet Muḥammad, and these had an impact on the evolving Qur'anic hermeneutics.⁴⁴ I use the term "sectarian polemics" here to refer to the inter-school rivalries that were gradually developing within Muslim groups and

⁴³ Mirzā Abū al-Faḍl, *The Koran: A New Translation from the Original* (Bombay: Reform Society, 1955). Originally published in 1911.

⁴⁴ The related issue of the relationship between Qur'anic interpretation and the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad was very relevant to what Farāhī thought about how to interpret the Qur'an. His own understanding of Muslim scripture was shaped by placing Qur'anic verses and suras on the larger canvas of the career of the Prophet.

schools of thought from the first half of the nineteenth century and that accelerated in the post-1857 period. The context of sectarian polemics was epitomized in the debates between the two major schools of thought in North India: Deobandīs and Barēlwīs. As an illustration, one of the controversial issues that emerged between them was the interpretation of the phrase *khātim al-nabiyyīn* (“seal of the prophets”) in the verse Q 33:40.⁴⁵ The issue of the Prophet Muḥammad being the last of the prophets in the Abrahamic tradition rose to prominence against the background of the emergence of the Aḥmadiyya movement among Muslims in the Punjab. The founder of that movement, Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908), claimed to be another prophet of Islam after the Prophet Muḥammad. This gave rise to debates between Aḥmadīs and other Muslim groups. This also resulted in debates among Muslim groups in general over the interpretation of the Qur’anic verses that dealt with the nature of the Prophet. Aḥmad Raḍā Khān (d. 1921), founder of the Barēlwī school, castigated Deoband’s founder, Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotwī (d. 1880) as a *kāfir* (“infidel”) for denying Raḍā Khan’s interpretation of the phrase “seal of the prophets” in the verse Q 33:40.⁴⁶ As a consequence, the issue informed competing understandings of the Qur’an with regard to the nature of the prophethood. In terms of the interpretation of the related Qur’anic verses, the issue was contested more through theological

⁴⁵ Q 33:40: “Muhammad is not the father of any one of you men; he is God’s Messenger and the seal of the prophets: God knows everything.”

⁴⁶ Raḍā Khān insisted that it was only his interpretive position that could strengthen the idea of the finality of the prophethood of the Prophet Muḥammad. Otherwise, the door would remain open for new claimants to the prophethood like Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad of Aḥmadiyya movement. The two texts seminal in the inter-sectarian debates of the colonial period, in which Qur’anic interpretation was involved, were Nānotwī’s *Taḥdhīr al-Nās* and Raḍā Khān’s *Ḥussām al-Ḥaramayn*. A recent work that analyzes these intra-Sunni sectarian polemics is SherAli Tareen, “The Limits of Tradition: Competing Logics of Authenticity in South Asian Islam” (PhD diss., Duke University, 2012), 104, 217. With respect to the debates on the issue of prophetology, see Ḥusayn Aḥmad Najīb, ed., *‘Aqā’id-i ‘Ulamā’-yi Dēoband awr Ḥussām al-Ḥaramayn* (Karachi: Dār al-Ishā‘at, n.d.); Bādshāh Tabassum Bukhārī, *Khatm al-Nabuwat awr Taḥdhīr al-Nās* (Lahore: Idāra Ishā‘at al-‘Ulūm, 2011).

and prophetological reasoning and not on strictly linguistic grounds, which in turn reflected the ways Muslims were engaging with the text of the Qur'an.

Another pertinent issue in the intra-Sunni sectarian polemics, involving Qur'anic hermeneutics, was the nature of the Prophet's knowledge of the unseen (*ghayb*). Religious positions on the extent of the Prophet's knowledge of the unseen world were based on specific understandings of the Qur'an and other religious texts.⁴⁷ Muslim interlocutors drew upon the Qur'an in order to support or dismiss one viewpoint or another. In all these instances, the issue of prophetology informed the approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics. Employing Qur'anic interpretation, post-Mutiny prophetological debates were situated on a long historical trajectory of controversy that had originated in a clash of views between the grandson of Walī Allāh, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā'īl (d. 1831) and a famous scholar of the time, Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (d. 1861). Deobandīs stood with the prophetological positions of the former and the school of Barēlwīs with the latter. A recent study on intra-Sunni sectarian polemics clearly outlines the tensions and subsequent polemical discourses that emerged due to inter-school and scholarly rivalries. It says:

...such rivalries should instead be approached as a contestation between competing *rationalities of tradition and reform* [emphasis added]. These rationalities become centrally visible during specific conjunctures of adversarial activity in which the limits of the normative and the heretical, identity and difference, are authoritatively debated.⁴⁸

The point is that the discourses around the nature of the Prophet in this atmosphere of sectarian polemics had a direct implication both for the ways the Qur'an came to be

⁴⁷ Two of the verses related to the issue included: Q 59:22: "He is God: there is no god other than Him. It is He who knows what is hidden as well as what is in the open, He is the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy." The other verse, Q 18:110, reads: "Say, 'I am only a human being, like you, to whom it has been revealed that your God is One. Anyone who fears to meet his Lord should do good deeds and give no one a share in the worship due to his Lord.'"

⁴⁸ Tareen, "The Limits of Tradition," 260.

understood as a scripture carrying a specific religious worldview and also for the ways it was interpreted in philological terms.

The Impact of Science and Historical Criticism

Related to the contexts of colonial rule and European works on the Qur'an was the larger influence of the development of science and critical reasoning on the understanding of the Bible and the Qur'an. In the case of the Bible, the mid-Victorian conflict between science and religion⁴⁹ was felt in the colonies as well, and it had repercussions for the understanding of the Qur'an by Muslim scholars.

Engagements between science and religion in the Western tradition are characterized as a history of alternating periods of debate and dialogue. On occasions, the two would come into conflict and at other times, both sought to co-exist either through engaging in dialogue or in distinguishing themselves as dealing with separate domains of human existence. On this spectrum, a major part of the nineteenth century was seen as featuring a conflict between science and religion.⁵⁰ For discerning the relevance of this conflict to the development of Muslim ideas on interpreting the Qur'an, the case of the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in Great Britain is a useful and an illustrative case study. The work embodied in it the thought that had consequences for understanding all the scriptures in the Abrahamic tradition in new ways. Published in 1860, this collection of essays was an edited work that gathered various important voices in England who were reviewing the conflict between science and religion, including those who were subjecting the Bible to historical criticism. Mostly Anglican clergymen, the

⁴⁹ Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Part II, 1860-1901* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1970), 75-111.

⁵⁰ See John H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (1991; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 367-373.

contributors to *Essays and Reviews* addressed pertinent issues in the wake of the emerging works in previous decades, including the recently published 1859 work of Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, on the theme of biological evolution. As Owen Chadwick notes, the publication elicited furor in evangelical Christian circles and was seen as an attack on the church from within.⁵¹ Included in the collection was a seminal essay entitled “On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity” by Baden Powell, an Anglican clergyman and a professor of geometry at the University of Oxford.⁵² The main argument of Baden Powell’s essay bore the key elements of thoughts on the issue of the compatibility of the laws of nature and the laws of God, which would be discussed by Aḥmad Khān, a topic dealt with in the next chapter. Baden Powell concentrated, among other issues, on the evidential value of miracles and did for miracles what another essay in the volume did for the incredibility of predictive prophecy.⁵³ Both authors were dismissive of what they thought to be contrary to the uniformity of nature. In passing, Baden Powell also paid tribute to Darwin’s work for its attestation to the self-functioning of nature. The basic premise of Baden Powell was that any event that was unexplainable should not necessarily be interpreted as miraculous. In the wake of scientific thinking based on the study of nature, he argued, the uncritical acceptance of supernatural explanations was an archaic hold-over from human history. Moreover, taking puzzling phenomena as, of necessity, miracles was another ready-made interpretation which on closer scrutiny did not stand. He also analyzed pre-modern opinions on the nature of miracles in Christian and Jewish traditions and tried to substantiate that the matter was not always clear as was generally portrayed by conservative clergies. Moreover,

⁵¹ Chadwick, *Victorian Church*, 78-79.

⁵² Baden Powell, “On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1860), 94-144.

⁵³ Rowland Williams, “Bunsen’s Biblical Researches,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1860), 50-93.

any interpretation of a seemingly supernatural sign was for him always informed by the stage of enlightenment an era was passing through. In this regard, the following quotation from Baden Powell is instructive:

All moral evidence must essentially have respect to the parties to be convinced. 'Signs' might be adapted peculiarly to the state of moral or intellectual progress of one age, or one class of persons, and not be suited to that of others. With the contemporaries of Christ and the Apostles, it was not a question of testimony or credibility; it was not the mere occurrence of what they all regarded as a supernatural event, as such, but the particular character to be assigned to it, which was the point in question. And it is to the entire difference in the ideas, prepossession, modes, and grounds of belief in those times that we may trace the reason why miracles, which would be incredible now, were not so in the age and under the circumstances in which they are stated to have occurred.⁵⁴

Later his essay elicited a considerable storm of reaction in formal responses from various Christian corners.⁵⁵

The fact that Baden Powell's ideas had a direct relevance to the evolution of Muslim thought on Qur'anic hermeneutics is attested, for instance, by the engagement of the archdeacon of Calcutta, John Pratt, with *Essays and Reviews* and other similar works. Aḥmad Khān engaged with Pratt's work in his commentary on the Bible, *Tabyīn al-Kalām*.⁵⁶ Moreover, Baden Powell's idea of the divine consideration of different kinds of audiences of a scripture was also found in Aḥmad Khān's thought when he presented his understanding of *muḥkamāt* and *mutashābihāt* in the Qur'an.

⁵⁴ Baden Powell, "On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity," 117.

⁵⁵ A much-quoted response was by H. L. Mansel, which Baden Powell did not live to read. H.L. Mansel, "On Miracles as Evidences of Christianity," in *Aids to Faith*, ed. William Thompson (New York: Appleton & Co., 1862), 9-54.

⁵⁶ John H. Pratt, *Scripture and Science not at Variance: With Remarks on the Historical Character, Plenary Inspiration, and Surpassing Importance, of the Earlier Chapters of Genesis*, 6th ed. (Calcutta: Barham, Hill & Co., 1871).

Related to this conflict between science and religion was the method of historical criticism in studying the Bible that gained ground in Europe from the eighteenth century and was already in the air of British India when Muslim scholars were interpreting the Qur'an. The impact of historical criticism on religious thinking was similar to that of natural science. Critiquing traditional notions about the authorship and "inspiration" of the Bible, historical criticism attempted anew to address questions about the origin and development of biblical scriptures. Its approach was based on internal analysis of the text and on studying the Bible by connecting its various texts to other existing records of ancient times. This approach to the Bible gave birth to new questions such as: "What is the relation of the biblical books to each other? How and why were they written? By whom? When? What did the writers intend to say? Were there historical causes that might account for the events recorded in the scriptures?"⁵⁷ As we will see in later chapters, modern Muslim studies of the Qur'an addressed some of these questions as well, as did some of the papers in *Essays and Reviews*. Benjamin Jowett's essay, "On Interpreting the Scripture,"⁵⁸ argued that scriptures could be read like any other book, and the main aim in such a reading should be to recover the original meaning and not to create harmony between their sayings and science. He highlighted that the New Testament authors' change of meanings of Psalms manifested that no divine inspiration was at play in the work. Moreover, he was against sticking to older opinions about biblical verses, in which conventional scholars had overlaid the Bible with their own faulty readings on many occasions. He encouraged other Christians to welcome this new wave of nineteenth-century historical criticism of the Bible. Jowett was notably opposed to traditionalists' pressuring liberals to hide their opinions, a

⁵⁷ See Claude Welch, "Historical Criticism," in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen (New York, Gale, 2003), 410.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Jowett, "On the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Essays and Reviews* (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1860), 330-433.

phenomenon similar to what we will see in the case of Muslim scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Traditionalists were averse to modernists' tendency to highlight diversity and debate in the Muslim intellectual tradition.

The response of Christian evangelical missionaries in colonial India to the questions posed by the method of historical criticism was ambivalent or somewhat conservative. On the one hand, William Muir, addressing this issue in his book, *Call for New Era*, considered it a major challenge to evangelical efforts.⁵⁹ The basic problem, as seen by William Muir, was the disruptive potential of this approach to the Bible. It tended to raise suspicions in the minds of the untrained and of lay people who were not skilled in understanding the nuances of this criticism. On the other hand, John Muir, a Sanskrit scholar who was the brother of William Muir, succumbed to the force of this method and advised his fellow missionaries to be systematic in their study of the Bible and the scriptures of other religions.⁶⁰

All this had direct repercussions for Muslim thinking about the Qur'an. Muslim scholars attempted to find ways to deal with this challenge of reading the Qur'an historically, particularly in terms of its historicity and of the compilation of the Qur'an as a book. However, an important point to note here is that this scholarly use of historical criticism to study the Bible and the Qur'an had different contexts in colonial India than in the West. In Muslim contexts, many of the so-called modernist thinkers endorsed the use of this approach in revisiting their scripture. In Christian contexts, on the one hand, missionaries discouraged their fellow Christians from following the results of historical criticism of the Bible, but on the other hand, they themselves

⁵⁹ William Muir, *The Call of the New Era: Its Opportunities and Responsibilities*, ed. George Smith (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), 281-282.

⁶⁰ Powell, *Scottish Orientalists*, 258-60.

applied these methods to the study of the Qur'an and its history. This contradictory attitude of Christian missionaries and other Europeans toward the Qur'an in using the tools of historical criticism was one of the reasons why Muslim commentators and thinkers were pre-occupied, while responding to their opponents, with the issues of structure, arrangement, and collection of the Qur'an during the post-1857 period.

The Rise of Print Technology in British India

The nineteenth-century acceleration of the spread of print technology in colonial India had a direct consequence for the ways Muslim scholarship came to engage with the Qur'an. Although print technology had reached India in the sixteenth century and had gained some momentum at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was from the 1820s onwards, and more specifically, after 1857, that printing found an intensified impetus when it expanded to a broader population beyond its early functioning as an official colonial means of disseminating knowledge and beyond missionary circles.⁶¹ In particular, the rise of both a Hindu and a Muslim press in North India would impact the intellectual and social life of Muslims and Hindus in many ways.

Before we acquaint ourselves with the nature of this impact, it is pertinent to survey some of the key ideas offered by academic observers on the rise and impact of print technology and

⁶¹ Ulrike Stark, "The Coming of the Book in Hindi and Urdu," in *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet, India: Permanent Black, 2008), 29-106. Two of the earliest Muslim books to be printed were Shāh Ismā'īl Dihlawī's *Taqwiyat al-Īmān* and his *Shirāṭ al-Mustaqīm*, which were influential works in the context of Muslim reformism of the early nineteenth century. See Francis Robinson, "Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (February 1993): 240, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312883>. For the printing of religious literature in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, see Harlan Pearson, "Reform of the Masses and Popular Printed Religious Literature," in *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-century India: The Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008), 90-128.

related institutions. This can help us in gauging the influence of this facet of colonial context on Muslim engagements with the Qur'an. Building on the works of Benedict Anderson and Peter Hohendahl,⁶² Ulrike Stark's ideas are insightful in capturing and synthesizing different academic notions that have been offered concerning the emergence and impact of print technology in India from the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁶³ Stark observes that, having undergone a gradual expansion from Bengal to western and northern parts of colonial India, print technology contributed to what is called the diffusion and commercialization of knowledge and brought book-knowledge from the hold of a small reserve of religious elites to the broad public sphere. From a mere manuscript artefact in the pre-modern period, the book as an object of consumption became a public product after 1857. It also generated a new breed of authors who could write for a larger public and could in turn contribute to print capitalism by capitalizing on the reader's purchasing power. Moreover, it resulted in the introduction of new genres of writing and enabled further communication among communities of knowledge. For instance, print technology provided the means through which individuals and groups could launch their polemical literature, which commanded quite a readership in colonial India. In hermeneutical terms, enhanced publishing opportunities resulted in strengthening the interpretive positions of some viz-a-vis others, while also contributing to the doctrinal self-consciousness of believers. Publishing houses would engage with institutions such as Orientalist scholarship, indigenous writings, literary associations, colonial education and its school curricula. In addition, the notion of the canonicity of a work, which was the product of a new milieu of emerging publishing

⁶² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Hohendahl, *Building a National Culture*.

⁶³ Stark, *Empire of Books*, 1-28.

houses, could have a direct bearing on the popularity of a religious or non-religious writing. As

Stark writes in her work on the Naval Kishore Press, established in 1858 in Lucknow:

The successful publisher's choices not only *responded* to readership tastes and reflected processes of canonization as well as current trends in literary activity, they also *shaped* these processes...Publishers also influenced tastes: new editions, frequent reprints, cheap formats, and serialization had a direct bearing on enhancing the audience of a given text. The imprint of a publisher could invest a book with prestige; a contract with a reputed publishing house could be a step in an author's canonization. [italics in the original]⁶⁴

Stark draws upon Leslie Howsam to highlight that publishers' choices to print certain texts, and not others, had a direct intervention in the lives of reading public. They could be understood as "astute interpreters" of contemporary tastes or, more metaphorically, as "canaries in the coal-mines of the contemporary culture, testing the atmosphere in which they were doing business."⁶⁵

All the above conceptualizations effectively apply to what was happening in Muslim circles with regard to the rise of print technology. In the wake of this spread of the printed word, the response to this technology was in general welcoming. It was embraced, in general, by both the *'ulamā'* and other educated Muslims. Barbara Metcalf considers this technology as the driving force in the spread of Deobandī teachings, one that made it possible for the *'ulamā'* to expand their understanding and influence on religious issues. She notes this welcoming attitude in the reminiscences of one of the scholars:

There were only eighteen copies of Bukhari, and of these, generous people had divided copies into parts and distributed them amongst students so that they could study them. When I studied Tirmizi from Miyan Sahib three of us shared one copy; and we three lived in different sections of the city...One of us would study it for a

⁶⁴ Stark, *Empire of Books*, 11.

⁶⁵ Leslie Howsam, *Kegan Paul - A Victorian Imprint: Publishers, Books and Cultural History* (London and Toronto: Kegan Paul International and University of Toronto Press, 1998), 13.

few hours, then another would carry it off. . . No one had a chance to study a whole book . . . Because of reading incompletely and out of order [the study of] every book was deficient.⁶⁶

Moreover, an emergence of new authors and the impression of the canonicity of a work due to the rise of print technology was reflected in the widespread dissemination of new translations of the Qur'an into Urdu by other than so-called traditionalist authors. This emergence of new translations, at times in Urdu poetical idiom as well, was a source of major concern for the supposed custodians of tradition such as the Dār al-^oUlūm at Deoband.⁶⁷ For them, the print technology offered non-specialists in the Islamic sciences the opportunity to have their “inauthentic” translations of the Qur'an published. This could be hazardous, in their view, for its impact on the common reader's understanding of Muslim scripture, an outcome sometimes characterized as the rise of a kind of “Islamic protestantism”,⁶⁸ or as what Robinson analyzes in the following words:

...while print enabled ulama greatly to extend their influence in public affairs, it was also doing serious damage to the roots of their authority. By printing the Islamic classics, and the print run for a major text could be as many as ten thousand copies, and by translating them into the vernaculars they undermined their authority; they were no longer necessarily around when the book was read to make up for the absence of the author in the text; their precious *ijazas*, which brought the authority of the past to their learning in the present, were made less significant; their monopoly of the transmission of knowledge was broken. Books, which they literally possessed, which they carried in their hearts, and which they transmitted with a whole series of mnemonic aids to memory, could now be consulted by any Ahmad, Mahmud or Muhammad, who could make what they will of them.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 205-206.

⁶⁷ A government report in 1871 mentions that some thirty thousand copies of the Holy Qur'an had been published through printing activities of the *'ulamā'*. See the mention of the report by the colonial administration in Moinuddin Aqeel, “Commencement of Printing in the Muslim World: A View of Impact on Ulama at Early Phase of Islamic Moderate Trends,” *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, 2, no. 2 (March 2009), 18, <https://dx.doi.org/10.14989/79944>.

⁶⁸ Robinson, “Technology and Religious Change,” 242.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

This tension was also based on the fact that any translation project in essence was seen as an exegetical project, since rendering the Arabic Qur'an into an Urdu version was essentially a kind of an interpretation whereby the translator would choose specific vocabulary to convey what the text meant. As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, all this resulted in debates, for instance, between Thānawī and his Muslim interlocutors, such as Nadhīr Aḥmad (d. 1912) and Mirzā Ḥayrat Dihlawī (d. 1928), which had clear hermeneutical implications. The intra-Sunni polemics also contributed to the emergence of a diverse “sectarian press” in which different Muslim religious groups had their own arsenal of publishing enterprises.⁷⁰ The schools of Deobandīs and Barēlwīs were supported by publishing houses committed to their particular religious orientations and to the spread of their religious positions on various issues. Moreover, print technology made it possible for Qur'an commentaries to be made available for a wider public, which added to the evolution of a public sphere in colonial India.

The Question of “Authentic” Islam

The intellectual character of Islam in India from the eighteenth century, that is, roughly from the weakening of the Mughal Empire, to the early twentieth century has been a subject of great interest among historians. Along with the era's political history, writing the history of Muslim scholarship in the modern period has elicited great attention from many researchers working on the region. The accounts of this intellectual historiography of Muslim intellectuals, divines, and schools seem to converge on some common points, and this convergence has given birth to a somewhat received narrative in academic circles.⁷¹ This classic narrative, which is, in

⁷⁰ Farhan Ahmad Nizami, “Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab, 1803-1857” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 1983), 186-190.

⁷¹ See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 3-44; Francis Robinson, *The ‘Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (London: Hurst & Company), 9-40; Ian H. Douglas, *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography*, ed. Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1-27.

fact, a historiography of Muslim thought in India, revolves around certain dichotomies.

According to this standard interpretation of reformist ideas and movements, Muslim scholarship had been taking positions on the status of the *ma^cqūlāt* (“rational sciences of Islam”) and *manqūlāt* (“traditional disciplines of Islam”) since the time of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605). Some religious schools are portrayed in this historiography as having laid stress on *ma^cqūlāt* in understanding issues of Qur’anic interpretation and Islamic law, while others are seen as having been inclined towards *manqūlāt*. On any given issue, such as gender or *jihād*, the former is supposed to employ more rational analysis than the latter’s insistence on arguing from traditional opinions on the given issue.

Combined with this intellectual struggle was a theological issue that Muslim scholars, according to these historians, had been grappling with since the time of the great Mughal ruler. This was the continuing debate between the Naqshbandī and Chishtī Sufi circles concerning belief in the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“the oneness of being”). The Naqshbandī are seen as opponents of this theological belief, whereas the latter are portrayed as supporters of this idea. Many historians of modern Islam chart this intellectual journey along these two lines, that is, as a debate between the rationalists and traditionalists, and/or between supporters or opponents of the idea of the oneness of being. However, many times a particular scholar is portrayed as assuming the roles of both an *‘ālim* (“religious scholar”) and a Sufi simultaneously. Therefore, we often find scholars and Sufis donning their multifarious garbs, such as Deoband’s Thānawī, condemning competing positions as manifestations of “inauthentic” Islam.

How far this received narrative among academics actually captures the historical specificity and complexity of Muslim thought and reformism is a separate question, and the present writer does not subscribe to any simplified narrative regarding it. However, Muslim

discourses of colonial India did echo these competing positions, if only rhetorically, in making their claims to grasp “authentic” Islam. Their dichotomous ideas bring to light three underlying issues that were common in these intellectual and theological positions, all of which were present in some form in colonial India (such as in Thānawī and Raḍā Khān), and these positions had a bearing on the development of Qur’anic hermeneutics from the latter half of the nineteenth century. First was the problem of orthodoxy and heresy that was reflected in the debates on theological issues. As noted above in the section dealing with biographies of the Prophet, already in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, the polemics that had started between social forces siding with the theological thoughts either of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl or of Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī employed the Qur’an as the basis of their argument.⁷² These intellectual contestations grew more intense with the passage of time and gave birth to a considerable amount of polemical literature in which the interpretation and use of the Qur’an was quite prominent. These theological issues were so widespread in academic circles that Deoband’s Sufi patron, Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī (d. 1899; hereafter “Imdād Allāh”) had to write an influential tract on these controversial issues.⁷³

Second, the categorization of Indian Muslim schools into traditionalist and rationalist types hints at the underlying methodological issues that anticipated future hermeneutical developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century in understanding Islam and its texts. As noted above, Muslim scholarship had been taking positions on the status of *ma‘qūlāt* and *manqūlāt* from the early modern period down to the nineteenth century. The underlying issue was to find or establish the authentic method to arrive at properly interpreting the Qur’an and to

⁷² Tareen, “Limits of Tradition,” 19-98.

⁷³ Imdād Allāh Muḥājir Makkī, *Fayṣala-yi Haft Mas‘ala* (Lahore: Muslim Kitābwī, 1999). Originally published circa 1897.

issue verdicts on matters of Islamic law. On a given issue, the two schools could come up with competing positions, each based on their distinctive methodology. These larger epistemological currents carried with them a central question that would have a direct impact on the way the Qur'an was to be interpreted. That question was: What is the most authentic way to think about interpreting the Qur'an so that it may resolve all the issues of contention among the Muslim population?

Third, within these milieux of inter-school contestation, often a related phenomenon would become conspicuous and that was the desire for achieving social harmony. As we will see in subsequent chapters, in particular that on Farāhī, Muslim scholars often felt a need for criteria or a theory of knowledge (including a theory of Qur'anic hermeneutics) that could settle these matters of contention and division, and thus eliminate the social discord that had perceivably characterized Muslim scholarly circles in colonial India. Already in the eighteenth century, Wali Allāh had served as a good example, in a primitive form, of a trend-setter who emphasized returning to the Qur'an for a more "authentic" Islam. In the same vein, this quest led many, after 1857, to think about the Qur'an as the centre around which Muslims could unite or be made to unite. But the question was: What did taking the Qur'an as centre mean in terms of Qur'anic interpretation? This desired act of making the Qur'an serve as the criterion for settling theological and intellectual disputes required an interpretive methodology that could generate consensus. The chapter on Farāhī will discuss this in more detail.

Institutionalized Knowledge Systems, the Muslim Mindset, and the Qur'an

At a more meta-level, the need for new ways of approaching the Qur'an was rooted in emerging conceptions of authentic methods to generate knowledge in Muslim societies. If we read this intellectual facet of colonial India on a long historical trajectory, the work

of some Muslim scholars, as discussed in subsequent chapters, can be understood as a developed response to these epistemological currents that were the products of some half a century's experiments with educating Muslim youth. The very issue of epistemology and the related matter of how to educate students in formal institutions of instruction had a direct bearing on the new ways of approaching the Qur'an. This atmosphere informed Muslim commentators' horizon of understanding the scripture, and the history of Muslim education in British India implicitly points to the struggle between the traditional and non-traditional ways of interpreting the Qur'an. In North India, as an illustrative case, the establishment of Delhi College encapsulated the hidden tensions that would later emerge in the post-Mutiny period regarding the most "correct" ways to teach younger generations of Muslims about religious sciences and practical disciplines. A letter from the college principal addressed to the famous French scholar of Urdu literature, J.H. Garcin de Tassy (1794–1878), hints at this emerging scenario:

Delhi College has two educational divisions. In one division, in addition to Hindustani and English languages, European sciences are also taught. In the second division, eastern languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit are taught...In the last six months, I have recruited twenty translators in the college. In addition to translating key Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit works, they also translate books in the disciplines of physics, economics, history, philosophy, law, and English common law into Urdu.⁷⁴

In addition, the very institution of Delhi College embodied two opposing and promising currents within Muslim scholarship that developed into what would be later perceived by academic observers of modern Islam as traditionalists and modernists. The famous poet

⁷⁴ cAbd al-Ḥaqq, *Marḥūm Dillī Kālīj*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqī-yi Urdū, 1945). The letter, dated December 19, 1841, can be seen in the beginning of the book as an attachment.

and Muslim activist, Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī (d. 1914), a close associate and biographer of Aḥmad Khān, recorded his early observations of social feelings towards the college:

Although the old Delhi College was at its peak at that time, in the society in which I grew up, knowledge meant learning in Arabic and Persian. There was no mention of English language heard in places like the town of Pānīpat and if there was anything known, it was the idea that this language is only required if one has to pursue a government job, and that no knowledge can be gained in the language. On the contrary, the scholars of our madrasas considered these English-trained people as ignorant. When I reached Delhi, the instructors and students, at the place where I stayed, used to consider the graduates of the college as having people of no knowledge...I stayed there for about a year and a half but did not pay a visit to the college nor desire to meet its students.⁷⁵

The emerging conception of knowledge in institutions like Delhi College is often attributed to the varied influences of Western science and philosophical thinking in North India.⁷⁶ To Gail Minault and others, this influence was somewhat different in character than that at work in Bengal, particularly in terms of the relatively less influence of philosophy at Delhi College, but the underlying change that led to some sort of “Delhi Renaissance” was predictable.⁷⁷ This “renaissance” was based on an emphasis on greater freedom of thought and cultivation of critical reasoning which later led to responses from both Muslim and Hindu contemporary intellectuals on philosophical and scientific issues.⁷⁸ Again, Delhi College was the centre of this new orientation. If we look at different persons attached, directly or indirectly, with the college and the larger history of

⁷⁵ Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, “Tarjama-yi Ḥālī,” in *Maqālāt-i Ḥālī*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqī-yi Urdu, 1934), 264.

⁷⁶ See Sharad Deshpande, ed., *Philosophy in Colonial India* (New Delhi and Heidelberg: Springer, 2015); D.M. Bose, S.N. Sen and B.V. Subbarayappa, eds., *A Concise History of Science in India* (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 1971).

⁷⁷ Gail Minault, “Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi and the ‘Delhi Renaissance’,” in *Delhi through the Ages: Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society*, ed. R.E. Frykenberg (Delhi: New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 287-298.

⁷⁸ The gradual increase in the influence of this new learning can be seen in the recollections of a notable scholar in India, °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī (1892-1977) who mentioned his journey from tilting towards atheism and disbelief to his later shift to faith in Islam through his association with Ṭhānawī. °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī, *Āp Bītī* (Karachi: Majlis-i Nashriyāt-i Islām, 1996), 233-259. Originally written in 1967.

post-Mutiny development of Muslim educational institutions in North India, there were clear indications towards this epistemological transformation that led to the emergence of opposing positions on how to teach younger generations, including religious education. Three types of patterns come to our notice. First, people like Master Rāmchandra, who was a science teacher at the college and later a convert to Christianity, wrote about his fascination for critical thinking. His personal decision to convert to a different faith occasioned social furor.⁷⁹ His very presence in the college in the aftermath of his conversion raised the question, among Muslim students of the college, of what it meant to think in individual terms, thereby leaving one's own original community. In the case of Rāmchandra, that community was Hindu, but similar instances occurred when some Muslims embraced Christianity, as in the case of °Imād al-Dīn Lāhiz, the Muslim who converted to Christianity in the aftermath of Agra debate between Carl Pfander and Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī (d. 1892). The very idea of adhering to one's own religious tradition seemed to be at stake. With so much seeming to rest on the strength of rational arguments in any given exchange, the Muslim intellectual leaders were compelled to think of new ways to educate future generations of Muslims.

Second, important Muslim intellectuals of the time in Delhi like Sayyid Aḥmad Dihlawī, Zakā Allāh, Nadhīr Aḥmad, and Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, who were either educated or associated with Delhi college in some direct or indirect way, came to represent a group opposing traditionalist intellectuals on matters of religion, including the interpretation of the Qur'an. Their writings and epistemological approaches, as these emerged in the post-1857 period, were in stark contrast to those who would claim to be the "guardians" of

⁷⁹ °Abd al-Ḥaqq, *Marḥūm Dillī Kālīj*, 48-51.

Muslim tradition – figures such as Nānotwī, who may be provisionally labelled proto-Deobandī of the pre-Mutiny period. Some of these Delhi College intellectuals, with their new visions, ultimately had strong links with Aḥmad Khān. Hence, a separate stream, in contrast to traditionally oriented circles, was emanating from Anglo-Oriental institutions of education.

Finally, the new view of knowledge was epitomized in the person of Mamlūk °Alī (1789-1851), who was a lecturer in the traditional Islamic sciences at Delhi College. It is from his personal tutelage that the founders of the later Deoband madrasa, Nānotwī and Rashīd Aḥmad Gangohī (d. 1905), emerged. Mamlūk °Alī was seen as the bulwark of traditional disciplines and an inspiring teacher for the next generation of traditionalist scholars who were facing a rapidly changing world.⁸⁰ His person and thought embodied the very roots of the traditionalist currents that ultimately grew in the post-1857 period in the form of the Dār al-°Ulūm at Deoband and other religious seminaries.

In addition to these intellectual streams that pointed towards the future of education in colonial India, a quick survey of educational institutions of the post-1857 period, in the sense of emerging madrasas and Anglo-Oriental colleges of various stripes, tacitly highlights this pattern of changing attitudes about how to approach knowledge, including religious knowledge, in the wake of various disagreements. In contrast to the approach in old, enduring madrasas, the basic emphasis in these new institutions of knowledge was in ascribing more weight to the possibility of rethinking or revisiting what was perceived as given in the Muslim scholarly tradition. Ḥālī, who had earlier observed differences in and

⁸⁰ Metcalf identifies the different conceptions of education as the diverging trends that ultimately shaped the establishing of new educational institutions in the post-Mutiny period. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 71-86. For Nānotwī's rebuttal of the emerging trend toward Anglicization of knowledge, see his biography Manāẓir Aḥsan Gilānī, *Sawānīḥ Qāsmī*, vol. 2 (Deoband: Dār al-°Ulūm Deoband, n.d.), 83-84.

varied attitudes toward traditional and Anglicized forms of education, came to encapsulate this tension between the competing approaches to knowledge in colonial India. He opined with respect to the need for a new exegesis of the Qur'an as follows:

But those, who are seeing with their eyes that the more Western education is spreading in the world, the more people's religious beliefs and ideas are vanishing, can clearly see the need for this [new interpretation of the Qur'an]. They very well know that the need that led ancient theologians (*mutakallimīn*) to go against the interpretation of pious earlier generations, has reached to its ultimate level in these [contemporary] times.⁸¹

One can even provisionally argue that the formation of educational institutions such as the Dār al-ʿUlūm at Deoband, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, the Nadwat al-ʿUlamāʾ in Lucknow, and the Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ of Farāhī manifested those hidden tensions on issues dealing with the very methods to interpret the foundational texts, including the Qur'an. In the last analysis, these opposing currents can be seen as part of the horizon within which post-Mutiny Muslim commentators of the Qur'an were viewing their world.

Arabic Literature and Delhi Literary Circles

The study of Arabic literature, in particular the pre-Islamic and the classical, has a special relevance for the study of the Qur'an. Selections from Arabic literature have been routinely part of madrasa curricula as an aid to understanding the Qur'an over the centuries. When Muslim commentators were pursuing their exegetical projects in the post-1857 period, there was already an established tradition of studying Arabic literature existing in the Indian sub-continent, and, as one historian of this Indian literature observed, "secular-scholarly and secular-literary uses of

⁸¹ Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, "Qurʾān-i Majīd mēn ab Naʿī Tafsīr kī Gunjāʾish Bāqī hay yā nahīn?" in *Maqālāt-i Ḥālī*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqī-yi Urdū, 1934), 246. The article was originally published in December 1899 in the journal *Maʿārif* from Aligarh.

Arabic in India” had an underlying religious motivation.⁸² This larger impression of the sacredness of studying Arabic language and literature is also attested in the studies on the contribution of Indian Muslims to Arabic literature.⁸³

Despite this age-old connection of Arabic language and literature with the study of the Qur’an, this perennial link is often forgotten when studying works that emanated from the latter half of the nineteenth century. What has been written on the history of the modern Qur’an commentary in South Asia normally views exegetical currents mainly as the outcome of either the interplay of traditionalism and modernism, or as a story of conflicts between rival schools of thought. But investigating the history of some of the established literary circles in Delhi and other towns in North India⁸⁴ reveals strong but hidden intellectual currents that influenced Muslim scholarly thinking about the Qur’an from the early decades of the nineteenth century until it fell a prey to inter-faith and intra-faith polemics. The aim of this section is to point towards a broad reconstruction of literary cultures that hinted at the complex social and intellectual history that was unfolding in multiple directions. In highlighting this facet of Muslim intellectual life, the purpose here is to allude to those multiple intellectual contexts in which understanding of the Qur’an was taking shape in North India. Sheldon Pollock’s work on literary cultures in South Asia also affirms the value of this aspect of social history for the purposes of the current study. He writes:

Most important of all, this search would mean learning to think in a historical-anthropological spirit: trying to understand what the texts of South Asian literature meant to the people who wrote, heard, saw, or read them, and how these meanings

⁸² Tahera Qutbuddin, “Arabic in India: A Survey and Classification of its Uses, Compared with Persian,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127, no. 3 (July – September 2007): 332, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20297278>.

⁸³ See Aḥmad Idrīs, *al-Adab al-‘Arabī fī Shibh al-Qārra al-Hindiyya hattā Awā’il al-Qarn al-‘Ishrīn* (Cairo: ‘Ayn li-l-Dirāsāt wa al-Buḥūth al-Insāniyya wa al-Ijtimā‘iyya, 1998).

⁸⁴ F.U. Farooqi, *Lucknow: A Centre of Arabic and Islamic Studies during the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Falāḥ-i-Dārayn Trust, 1999). Cited in Qutbuddin, “Arabic in India,” 322, n. 25.

may have changed over time. We cannot orient ourselves to a text without first grasping how its readers oriented themselves— unless we want to read it in a way that no South Asian reader ever did and abandon the attempt to know what literary culture meant in history.⁸⁵

In this section, the influence of this literary thread in the intellectual history of exegesis is illustrated by casting a quick glance at the careers and works of three Muslim intellectuals who either spearheaded the work of these circles or were the product of them in some ways. Foremost among them was Muftī Ṣadr al-Dīn Āzurdah (1789-1868), whose home was portrayed as one of the centres of literary inquiry into and debate on the study of Arabic literature, in addition to Persian and Urdu literatures.⁸⁶ Āzurdah held the key post of *ṣadr al-ṣudūr* (“chief judge”) in Delhi as part of the colonial administration. A poet of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, and a student of Walī Allāh’s son, Shāh °Abd al-°Azīz, Āzurdah was universally admired for his religious knowledge and his excellence as a scholar of Arabic.⁸⁷ The careers of one of his students, Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī (d. 1886) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, a student Sahāranpūrī encapsulated this particular feature of Delhi’s scholarly life, which had a direct bearing on the evolution of ideas related to the interpretation of the Qur’an in the post-Mutiny period. Included in the participants in Āzurdah’s circle were also certain founders of Deoband’s madrasa such as Nānotwī.⁸⁸ Āzurdah is also believed to have had the works of the tenth-century Arabic poet, al-Mutanabbī, included in the madrasa curricula of his time.⁸⁹ His circle was also connected with that of his contemporary and close friend, Faḍl-i Ḥaqq Khayrābādī (1797-1861), whose father

⁸⁵ Sheldon Pollock, introduction to *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

⁸⁶ °Abd al-Raḥmān Iṣlāḥī, *Muftī Ṣadr al-Dīn Āzurdah* (New Delhi: Maktaba Jāmi°a, 1977).

⁸⁷ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Muftī Muḥammad Ṣadr al-Dīn Khān Āzurdah,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā°il Pānīpatī, vol. 16 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 2007), 280-300.

⁸⁸ Iṣlāḥī, *Muftī Ṣadr al-Dīn Āzurdah*, 48-50.

⁸⁹ Shaykh Nadhīr Ḥusayn, “Mawlawī Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī: °Arabī Zabān kē Adīb wa Shā°ir,” *Ma°ārif* (September 1990): 200.

was one of Āzurdah's teachers.⁹⁰ Himself an author of Arabic *dīwān* and a scholar of the Islamic sciences, Khayrābādī's literary work in Arabic and his influence were unfortunately eclipsed, first, by his theological polemics against Shāh Ismā'īl Dihlawī, and subsequently by his participation in the event of 1857. Both these luminaries, Khayrābādī and Āzurdah, were at the centre of pre-Mutiny discussions around Arabic literature and consequently on Qur'anic language, style, and diction.

While the above two literary figures were considered the backbone of these circles, along with Urdu poet Muṣṭafā Khān Shayfta (d. 1869), it is the third luminary, Sahāranpūrī who not only kept this legacy of Āzurdah alive in the later decades but also hinted at the direct connection between this important literary current and the study of the Qur'an.⁹¹ Sahāranpūrī arrived in Delhi around 1838 and studied Arabic literature with Āzurdah. Later, in 1884, he became the chair of the newly established Faculty of Oriental Sciences at the University of the Punjab in Lahore in western Punjab where he trained the next generations of Qur'an commentators including Farāhī, whose work will be discussed in Chapter Five, and others such as Asghar °Alī Rūhī (1871-1954). An Arabic poet, whose *dīwān* was published by Farāhī, Sahāranpūrī was admired for his mastery of pre-Islamic Arabic literature and his skills in composing verses in the style of *Jāhili* poets. He wrote his marginalia on the famous pre-Islamic poet, al-Nābigha al-Dhubiyānī, whose poetry Farāhī drew upon in his own interpretation of the Qur'an. Sahāranpūrī also wrote a supercommentary (*ta'liqāt*) on *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, based on his philological approach.⁹² Moreover, his student, Farāhī, openly acknowledged Sahāranpūrī's

⁹⁰ Firdaws Sahūl and Khāliq Dād Malik, "Tarjama Muḥammad Faḍl al-Ḥaqq Khayrābādī," in *Diwān Faḍl al-Ḥaqq Khayrābādī*, eds. Firdaws Sahūl and Khāliq Dād Malik (Lahore: Dār al-Islām, 2016), 29.

⁹¹ Shāh Nawāz °Ālam, "Mawlānā Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī kī °Arabī Zabān o Adab mēn Khidmāt" (PhD diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 2008).

⁹² Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī, *Ta'liqāt al-Jalālayn* (Aligarh: Institute Press, 1870).

influence on him in terms of reading the Qur'an in the light of pre-Islamic literature.⁹³ Not only Farāhī but others such as Shibli Nu^cmānī of Nadwat al-^cUlamā³ studied with Sahāranpūrī as well.

The careers of the three individuals considered above point to some of the latent but seminal currents in the pre-Mutiny period. Without a detailed study on this particular aspect of Delhi's cultural and literary life, it will be difficult to estimate the value of this literary thread with exactitude. However, what we have seen so far, if only briefly, does suggest a need to look beyond the perceived hegemonic currents of traditionalism and modernism through which modern Islam is usually understood or historicized.

In the light of the above analysis, the main question we face is what such literary circles meant for the study and understanding of the Qur'an in the decades after 1857. The point is that several literary threads influenced the interpretation of the Qur'an on strictly literary grounds, parallel to its interpretation being informed by other deep cultural forces of the period. As will be shown in later chapters, scholars such as Farāhī, who came to view the Qur'an as a coherent literary text, were influenced by this strong literary strand whose presence remained hidden amidst other historical currents such as inter-faith and intra-Muslim polemics, and Muslim reform and revivalism. A look at the worlds of Āzurdah, Khayrābādī, Sahāranpūrī, and their students, shows that thinking about the Qur'an was probably not expected to be an enterprise of establishing fixed meaning, even in traditionalist circles, as it usually came to be perceived in

⁹³ See Chapter Five on the interpretation of Q 95. Farāhī's argument drew upon the pre-Islamic poet, al-Nābigha al-Dhubiyānī. This points to his possible inspiration from Sahāranpūrī who wrote marginalia on the poet as well. ^cĀlam, "Mawlānā Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī," 198.

later times. This is also attested to some extent by the presence in these circles of scholars belonging to all types of scholarly groups, including Nānotwī, the Deobandī.

Empire, Networks of Ideas, and the Qur'an

In addition to the local scenarios within British India that had implications for the interpretation of the Qur'an, larger global networks of ideas within the intersecting spaces of the Ottoman and British empires influenced the ways Muslims in colonial India came to view their sacred scripture. While many studies highlight the global aspects of the broader Muslim world in the age of empire,⁹⁴ the purpose of this section is specifically to identify certain historical factors that came to influence Muslim thought on Qur'anic hermeneutics in colonial India. The focus here is to identify some global intellectual threads with which Muslims in colonial India developed intellectual connections. Some of the phenomena that influenced these interactions included pan-Islamism, anti-imperialism, Muslim emigration after the Mutiny, struggle for intellectual revival by overcoming sterility in Muslim thought, and constructing a reformism based on the tradition.⁹⁵

These varied initiatives provided shared contexts of interaction linking British India and the Ottoman Empire. In general terms, the Hijaz, with its Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina, was an informal centre for the exchange of ideas and for the study of

⁹⁴ On the connected worlds of the British and Ottoman Empires, see Dina Rizk Khoury and Dane Keith Kennedy, "Comparing Empires: The Ottoman Domains and the British Raj in the Long Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 2 (2007): 233-244, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/220767>; Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, eds., *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Omar Farouk Bajunid, ed., "Arab communities and Networks in South and Southeast Asia," special issue, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 32, no. 3 (2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/i23653912>; Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁹⁵ Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Role of Arabic and the Arab Middle East in the Definition of Muslim Identity in Twentieth Century India," *The Muslim World* 87, no. 3-4 (July-October 1997): 272-98, doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.1997.tb03640.x.

the Islamic sciences.⁹⁶ Already in the eighteenth century, Walī Allāh had made a historical sojourn to the Hijaz and stayed there for some two years, learning from Arab scholars and experiencing some kind of “Meccan Revelations” as described in his *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn*.⁹⁷ Whether he brought elements of Wahhābī thought back home with him is a matter of some controversy. But scholars do try to connect his later thought with elements of Wahhābī and Salafī thinking that was later to influence South Asian ideas of fundamentalism and of Islamic learning based on Ḥadīth and *manqūlāt*.⁹⁸ Moreover, recent studies have established the presence of intellectual and educational connections between Ahl-i Ḥadīth groups in British India and the Hijaz.⁹⁹ In addition to the stories about Walī Allāh, we have a continuous flow of biographical tracts about key nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars that depict them routinely staying in the Hijaz to learn from Arab scholars after performing the *Hajj* pilgrimage.¹⁰⁰

Apart from these broad contacts with the outer-world, the Mutiny itself, as an historical moment, also resulted in the migration of key Muslim scholars and holy men

⁹⁶ See Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith, *Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean 1750s–1960s* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Patricia Risso, *Merchants and Faith: Muslim Commerce and Culture in the Indian Ocean* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁹⁷ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Fuyūḍ al-Ḥaramayn*, trans. Muḥammad Sarwar (Karachi: Dār al-Ishā‘at, 1993); ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq Anṣārī, *Shāh Walī Allāh kē ‘Arab Mashā’ikh* (Lahore: Muslim Kitābawī, 2015).

⁹⁸ Charles Allen attempts to make a case for Walī Allāh as being among the first to have borrowed these elements. While Allen’s effort seems rather speculative in the case of Walī Allāh, he provides more substantial evidence in the case of nineteenth century Muslim scholarship. Charles Allen, “The Hidden Roots of Wahhabism in British India,” *World Policy Journal* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 87-93, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-2005-3001>. In addition to the influences of Wahhābī thought, the related impact of the medieval Muslim scholar, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) as the perceived progenitor of the Salafī thought, has also been studied in the case of South Asia. See Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, “The Impact of Ibn Taimiyya on South Asia,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1990): 120-149, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/1.1.120>.

⁹⁹ Chanfi Ahmed, *West African ‘Ulamā’ and Salafism in Mecca and Medina: Jawāb al-Ifrīqī – The Response of the African* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹⁰⁰ On the question of sustained pilgrimage traffic in the period after the Mutiny, see Barbara Metcalf, “The Pilgrimage Remembered: South Asian Accounts of the *Hajj*,” in *Muslim Travellers, Pilgrimage, Migration, and the Religious Imagination*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori (London: Routledge, 1990), 85-107.

who were convicted by the British of participating in the uprising. Scholars like Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī, the well-known participant in the historic debate with the German Christian missionary, Pfander, and holy men of the standing of Imdād Allāh were among those convicted in the event of 1857. They migrated to Istanbul and the Hijaz to take refuge. Such transnational travels to the twin holy cities of Mecca and Medina and elsewhere in the Ottoman cities such as Cairo and Istanbul generated what Seema Alawi calls the “Muslim cosmopolis.” This newly constructed intellectual space provided platforms for globalizing religious ideas, including ideas about how one should understand the Qur’an.¹⁰¹ Welcomed by the Ottoman establishment, religious intellectuals such as Kayrānwī penned treatises, including writings on Qur’anic topics, and inaugurated madrasas through which they made connections back home in colonial India.¹⁰² The writings by Kayrānwī were influential on topics related to Qur’anic hermeneutics and the biography of the Prophet.¹⁰³ The Ottoman state patronized the publication of such writings and arranged for their translation into other languages of the Muslim world. In addition to Kayrānwī, Imdād Allāh also inspired local scholarship in India, in particular that of the Deoband school, whose scholars, including Thānawī, adopted him as a patron saint, despite his stay abroad. His writings on theological disputes, in which argumentation based on the Qur’an was a major strategy, had considerable influence.¹⁰⁴

In addition to the above connections, modernist ideas had their own specific ways of making their way across borders. These ideas travelled between the two empires quite

¹⁰¹ Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, 4.

¹⁰² Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism*, 169-221.

¹⁰³ For his Qur’an related works, see Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī, *Izhār al-Ḥaqq*, 4 vols. (Riyadh: Al-Ri’āsa al-‘Āmma, 1989). Originally published in 1864.

¹⁰⁴ See Imdād Allāh, *Fayṣala-yi Haft Mas’ala*. For his life and influence on Deoband, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

freely as a result of many factors. First, some of the key scholars of North India, such as Aḥmad Khān and Shiblī Nu[°]mānī, had experienced the broader world from their travels to major cities of the Ottoman Empire, where they observed their education systems and witnessed the publication of religious literatures in Arabic.¹⁰⁵ Second, the careers of influential figures such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) depicted these connections. A reformist and pan-Islamist, al-Afghānī stayed in Hyderabad in southern India for some two years and wrote a critique of “naturalist” ideas that tacitly alluded to Aḥmad Khān.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the ideas that al-Afghānī’s associate, the Egyptian Qur’an commentator, Muḥammad [°]Abdūh (d. 1905) published in the journal *Urwat al-Wuthqa* were available to Muslim audiences in colonial India.

The post-Mutiny world was a global world in multiple respects. We thus see scholars such as Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), a student of [°]Abdūh, visiting the Indian seminary Nadwat al-[°]Ulamā[°] in the early part of the twentieth century on the invitation of Nu[°]mānī.¹⁰⁷ Rashīd Riḍā also published Indian scholarly writings such as selections of *tafsīr* by Farāhī in his journal, *al-Manār*.¹⁰⁸ Beyond figures like him, there were larger networks of interaction brought about through the importing and exporting of religious literature between the two empires and from Europe.

¹⁰⁵ Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd* (New Delhi: Taraqqī-yi Urdū Biyūro, 1990). Originally published in 1900; Shiblī Nu[°]mānī, *Safarnāma Rūm wa Miṣr wa Shām* (Delhi: Qawmī Press, 1928). Nu[°]mānī made his travels in 1892.

¹⁰⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn “al-Afghānī”* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Aziz Ahmad, “Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Jamāl al-dīn al-Afghānī and Muslim India,” *Studia Islamica* 13 (1960): 55-78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595240>.

¹⁰⁷ For Riḍā’s visit and the transmission of ideas between Egypt and Indian scholars, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4-18.

¹⁰⁸ Sharf al-Dīn Iṣlāḥī, *Dhikr-i Farāhī* (Lahore: Dār al-Tadhkīr, 2002), 312.

Given this overall picture, we can discern a few elements of thought that had a direct or indirect bearing on the evolution of Qur'anic hermeneutics in colonial India. In this chapter, the purpose is to identify these boiling intellectual currents and situate them in transnational context. Two main global patterns in evolving Qur'anic hermeneutics are clearly discernible with all their attended complexity: a stress on the use of the earliest of Muslim traditions to interpret the Qur'an; and an understanding of the scripture based on larger religious worldviews, including the tendency towards affirming a holistic understanding of the Qur'an. The intended aim of the latter way of interpreting the Qur'an, often ascribed to modernists, was to free Islam from a perceived dead end. °Abdūh in Egypt is often understood as following this approach. Post-Mutiny Muslim engagements with the Qur'an bore the imprint of these ideas produced in transnational contexts.

Chapter Three
Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817-1898)
A Harbinger of Change

This chapter focuses on the study of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān’s intellectual work on the Qur’an. Of his Qur’anic output, his *tafsīr* has been studied to some extent in many academic studies on his life, times, and works. However, much of the work written so far on his Qur’anic interpretation has fixated on the apparently radical results of his investigation of the meaning of Qur’anic vocabulary and verses, and on how these radical results manifested his theological beliefs. There has been less interest in knowing in detail how and why he came to interpret the Qur’an in his own specific way and in establishing what his contributions were to the evolution of Qur’anic hermeneutics in India. The polemics hurled at Aḥmad Khān for his “heretical” pronouncements related to meanings of the Qur’an have also influenced earlier understandings of his work. Yet a detailed investigation of his interpretive methods and their application brings to light the rigour of his interpretive approach and also his larger view of the Muslim intellectual tradition, which has been the basis of the categorization of Muslim scholars writing since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Aḥmad Khān’s engagement with the Qur’an acquired the nature of a project in the contexts of colonial India, and his own intellectual and educational activism.¹ There are three main aspects to keep in mind about Aḥmad Khān’s Qur’an project.

¹ In addition to the above-mentioned need to study Aḥmad Khān, it is now time to focus in more detail on some of his key works. Qur’anic thought is the focus of this dissertation and chapter. Aḥmad Khān’s commentary on the Bible has been investigated in a recent doctoral study, which is not currently available to me. See Charles Magee Ramsey, “Elucidating the Word: Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): Revelation and Coherence” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2015). There is a further need to research his work on the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad in the context of British India. In addition, the person and works of Aḥmad Khān have perpetually lent themselves to multiple interpretations. Though some of these interpretations have come to hold sway in the academy, there seems always a possibility to understand him anew as manifested in a recent doctoral work on him that challenges the “commensurability thesis” according to which modernist Muslim scholars like Aḥmad

First, the project was the product of its age in the sense that certain historical processes necessitated his undertaking it. Second, it had a clear agenda to follow, and this agenda guided his numerous writings on the Qur'an. Finally, it had a significant later fate, impact, and legacy that invite us to judge the project as having been accomplished or remained unfulfilled.

The place of Aḥmad Khān in the history of modern Islam in India is recognized for many reasons. In the context of colonial India, contemporary admirers viewed his intellectual and educational contributions as instrumental for Muslims to cope with overwhelmingly new social and intellectual changes around them. At the same time, his Muslim opponents saw the growing influence of his “unorthodox” ideas on the larger masses as a serious threat and thus, wanted those ideas weakened. Meanwhile, the larger global Muslim intelligentsia of the time, including such cosmopolitan figures as al-Afghānī, compared him with other contemporary modernists, who were purportedly influenced by Western ideas on science and religion.² In addition to his contemporaries, analysts of modern Islam within the secular academy find the person of Aḥmad Khān as equally attractive for their understanding and conceptualizing of the nature of modern Islam in South Asia and in other regions. He is seen as *the* modernist scholar-activist that modern Islam has produced, whose aim was to directly reinterpret the Qur'an, as the only authentic source of Islam, in the light of the dictates of modern science and Western ideas, and not according to what the Muslim religious tradition had bequeathed.

A look at some of the key works in the discourse on Aḥmad Khān's life and thought bring to light certain common elements to which different writers subscribe to in various

Khān were involved in modifying their social and religious thought to make it commensurable with the standards of the West. See Khurram Hussain, “Islam as Critique” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2012).

² Aziz Ahmad, “Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Jamāl al-dīn al-Afghānī and Muslim India;” Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, “Ḥaqīqat-i Madhhab-i Nēcharī wa Nēchariān,” in *Maqālāt-i Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī*, trans. Mubāriz al-Dīn (Hyderabad: Nafīs Academy, 1946), 11-80.

shades.³ Earlier work has mostly studied him within the framework of his apparent reinterpretation of Muslim theology and within different shades of modernism such as the oft-repeated observation that he wanted to concentrate more on the Qur'an for authentic Islam and less on Ḥadīth. His early intellectual orientation is understood as inclined more towards Wahhābism. It is only after 1857 that he is seen more as a rationalist. In terms of his view of the Muslim intellectual tradition, assumptions about larger modernist thought prevails. He is understood as having an ambiguous link with the tradition or he is viewed as a scholar who disdained his centuries-long tradition with deigning eyes, an obstacle and a culprit that did not allow to see the real light of Islam through the Qur'an. In matters of Qur'anic interpretation and theology, reason and nature (or natural laws) were the criteria through which he reflected on the Qur'an and beliefs. Hence, his understanding of miracles and the nature of the Prophet's Ascension was the result of his applying these criteria. Christian W. Troll's work was the only thorough attempt at looking at his overall work in detail. Troll did try to identify some commonalities between his ideas and the tradition. He articulated Aḥmad Khān's view of science and tried to express his theological positions better by rooting his theology in his overall thought which was essentially based on Aḥmad Khān's idea of God and not on his subscribing blindly to reason and nature.⁴ However, Troll's main focus was on Aḥmad Khān's theology, and not on his work on Qur'anic hermeneutics. Moreover, Troll, like other commentators on his

³ See J.M.S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān* (Leiden: Brill, 1949); Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 2nd ed. (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1971); Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978); Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857-1964* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 31-56; Smith, *Islām in India*, 14-44.

⁴ Some historians have creatively argued for the role of class in influencing or shaping Aḥmad Khān's ideas. In other words, for these historians, his own class interests, as a member of either the upper or middle class or of the Urdu-speaking elite in North India, might have had a bearing on his religious, educational, and political ideas. See Smith, *Islām in India*, 14-44; Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

career and thought, did not bring to light the specific ways in which Aḥmad Khān was reading and understanding the Muslim intellectual tradition, and conceiving his own continuity with this heritage. The study of the development of his Qur’anic hermeneutics and his view of the tradition are the main focus of this chapter. Chapter Six will further build on the ideas studied here.

Aḥmad Khān’s Intellectual Formation and Works

Numerous biographies of Aḥmad Khān, including those written by his contemporaries, have contributed to our understanding of his life and the context of his works and educational activism.⁵ Among them Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī’s *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd* have merited the most attention of academic observers. Through these biographies and his own works, one has a chance to follow the development of his ideas. In a nutshell, these works bring to the surface a person educated in the traditional Islamic sciences along with some familiarity with modern scientific disciplines of his time. Well-entrenched in the colonial government, he appears as a believer who seemed to be in search of answers to the question of what it meant to be Muslim in colonial India of the latter half of the nineteenth century – not just Muslim as an individual but also as a community. This search gradually paved the way for a clearer reform project centred both on developing a new system of education to cope with the new world around Muslims and on producing Qur’anic thought to help his fellow Muslims face the hidden repercussions for faith that arose from modern education based on science and critical inquiry. It is in this historical scenario when we

⁵ Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd* (New Delhi: Taraqqī-yi Urdū Biyūro, 1990). Originally published in 1900; G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmad Khan* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1885); °Abd al-Ḥaqq, *Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān: Ḥālāt wa Afkār* (Karachi: Anjuman-i Taraqqī-yi Urdū, 1959); Jurjī Zaydān, *Ḥayāt-i Sayyid Aḥmad*, trans. Q.M. Farīq (Aligarh: Maṭba°-yi Aḥmadī, 1903).

study Aḥmad Khān's writings, the Qur'an seems to acquire a special place in his thought. That place is the central topic of this chapter.

Born into a Muslim *ashraf* ("elite")⁶ family having connections with the Mughal court in Delhi, Aḥmad Khān grew up tasting the high culture of his day and ultimately became part of the colonial legal administration. During the pre-Mutiny period he observed disputations between Christian missionaries and Muslim religious scholars and also saw the rise of a new outlook on life shaped by scientific developments. But he generally passed the pre-Mutiny period as a passive observer, despite the fact that some of his notable writings emerged during that time. The event of 1857 had a great influence on his thought and ultimately shaped many of his seminal writings after the catastrophic event. His work on the Qur'an was specifically meant to provide educated Muslims with an intellectual arsenal to cope with the onslaught of Western ideas of science and philosophy. In addition to his other numerous books, articles, and long essays, many of which have been compiled under the title *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*,⁷ three of his works stand out: 1) Partial Urdu commentary on the Qur'an entitled *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*;⁸ 2) partial

⁶ Indian Muslim society is generally stratified according to the categories of *ashraf* ("elite"), *ajlaf* ("lowest"), and *arzal* ("meanest") social groups, even though sociologists find these categories problematic and insufficient to represent the complexity of the society. The *ashraf* are generally comprised of foreign migrants from the Arab world, Central Asia, and Afghanistan and usually take on such titles as Sayyid, Shaykh, Khān, etc. Historically they constituted the land-owning classes in British India. Regarding the other two, members of the former are mostly into different occupations considered low in status in the society, whereas members of the latter are involved in jobs regarded as unclean. Those converts to Islam from Hinduism who were earlier stood higher in the Hindu caste system also became part of the *ashraf* by taking on various strategies of social mobility. A classic treatment of stratification in Indian Muslim society is given in Imtiaz Ahmed, ed., *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978).

⁷ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, 14 vols. (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, ca. 1962-1965). I have cited the later reprints of specific volumes used in the dissertation.

⁸ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān wa huwa al-Hudā wa al-Furqān*, 2 vols. (Lahore: Sir Sayyid Research Academy, 2010). Originally published in seven volumes. The first volume of the *tafsīr* was published in 1880 and the sixth in 1895. The seventh volume was published posthumously from his manuscripts after 1898.

commentary on the Bible entitled *Tabyīn al-Kalām*;⁹ 3) essays on the life of the Prophet entitled *Khuṭbāt-i Aḥmadiyya*.¹⁰

Before we start investigating his Qur’anic output, it will be useful to cast a quick glance at Aḥmad Khān’s educational background and intellectual formation and how he prepared himself to write on the Qur’an, the Bible, and the life of the Prophet. In terms of early development of his ideas, he mainly went through two phases of education. As a child, he began learning the basics of the Qur’an and started reciting it at home. Later a learned scholar in the service of his maternal grandfather taught him some basic readings in Persian literature, which were normal texts for moral edification, such as *Karīma* by the Persian Sufi poet, Sa°dī Shīrāzī (d. 1292). After this early education in Persian, Aḥmad Khān studied some Arabic textbooks on *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”) and grammar which were in use in madrasa curricula. However, his associate and biographer, Ḥālī, notes that Aḥmad Khān pursued these educational activities with no enthusiasm at this stage. After these early engagements with Persian and Arabic learning, he started taking interest in his early teens in scientific disciplines such as mathematics, a discipline for which his maternal family was renowned in Delhi. Studying with his maternal uncle, Aḥmad Khān also evinced keen interest in allied scientific disciplines such as mechanics and geometry. His last area of somewhat formal education was traditional Greek medicine. His biographer notes that Aḥmad Khan left these educational activities at the age of eighteen. His only engagement in academic and intellectual endeavours before his second phase of learning was his

⁹ For the modern edition based on the original 1862 edition, see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Tabyīn al-Kalām fī Tafṣīr al-Tawrāt wa al-Injīl °alā Millat al-Islām* (Aligarh: Sir Syed Academy, 2004).

¹⁰ For its modern edition, see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā°il Pānīpatī, vol. 11 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992). The text was written during Aḥmad Khān’s stay in England (1869-70).

regular participation in Delhi's literary circles (see Chapter Two), which were dominated by Āzurdah, Khayrābādī, and other leading poets such as Mirzā Asad Allāh Khān Ghālib (d. 1869).

The second phase of his somewhat serious education, particularly the in traditional Islamic disciplines, started when he was around twenty-nine and was transferred back to Delhi from Fatehpur Sikri as part of his duties in the colonial court system. In between these two phases, he experimented with writing some religious and scientific works. He wrote, for instance, on some aspects of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad and also translated portions of the famous rebuttal of Shi'a thought, *Tuḥfa Ithnā' Ashariyya*, written by Walī Allāh's son, Shāh 'Abd al-'Azīz.¹¹ On scientific matters, Aḥmad Khān translated a pre-modern treatise on mechanics. Around 1846, he became inclined towards further honing his skills in the traditional Islamic sciences and started formal study with a madrasa-trained specialist in these disciplines, eventually gaining a certificate in the Qur'anic sciences. Furthermore, Aḥmad Khān in this phase also studied pre-Islamic Arabic literature with Sahāranpūrī, who, as a student of Āzurdah, was a regular participant in Delhi literary circles. After this phase, Aḥmad Khān became more prolific in his religious, scientific, and religious writings.¹²

Along with the above educational endeavours and others, we can also trace his preparation for his three major writing projects: his commentaries on the Qur'an and the Bible, and his essays on the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. These projects were part of his responses to the challenge of Western ideas, European criticism of Islam, and the discord among Muslim factions on controversial religious issues. He felt the need to devise principles to think

¹¹ Baljon and others see an inclination towards Wahhābism in his early writings. See Baljon, *Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid*, 60-62.

¹² Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd*, 31-76.

systematically on Islam and its “authentic” content. Whereas his writing of the commentary on the Qur’an was mostly facilitated by his education in traditional Islamic disciplines and his consultation with specialists in the towns where he lived (whom he would hire while working on the project), his *Tabyīn al-Kalām* on the Bible was planned differently. Aḥmad Khan arranged to buy certain key books on Christianity such as Christian commentaries on the Bible, theological tracts, and works on biblical criticism. He also recruited someone educated in English to recite these texts for him in Urdu. On matters related to allusions to Christianity and Judaism in Ḥadīth and *tafsīr*, Aḥmad Khān consulted a Muslim Arabist residing in Delhi. For understanding different discourses on the Old Testament, he hired a Jewish expert, named Sālim, when he was posted at Ghāzipūr. In addition, he routinely consulted a famous Arabist and an expert in the Hebrew language, °Ināyat Rasūl Chiryākoī, on issues related to interpreting the Old Testament. Finally, Aḥmad Khān paid a European to translate his commentary on the Bible into English.

Aḥmad Khān’s third major project was his study of the life of the Prophet Muḥammad which he wrote and published during his stay in England between 1869 and 1870. He drew upon the resources of the India Office and British Museum libraries. Moreover, he spent his personal finances to buy books and manuscripts in Arabic, English, and Latin from Egypt and Europe, that is, works dealing with *Sīra* and related topics.

In the light of the above outline of his preparation to write on the Qur’an, the Bible, and the life of the Prophet, one may disagree with his conclusions on different issues, but in his capacity, he seemed to be making every effort to think systematically on these topics.

Aḥmad Khān's Principles of Qur'anic Interpretation

Aḥmad Khān's writings on Qur'anic topics had started appearing before his writing of a *tafsīr*. He was routinely writing in his journal *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, which he had started publishing after his return from England in 1870. Moreover, already in 1862, he had started his commentary on the Bible entitled, *Tabyīn al-Kalām*, which featured several important themes related to his later work on the Qur'an. Although it remained an incomplete commentary, *Tabyīn al-Kalām* reflected a rising trend toward dealing with issues related to the intertextuality of the Bible and the Qur'an, particularly in a milieu of Muslim-Christian disputations. It contributed to the evolution of methods to interpret the Bible in the light of the Qur'an. For Aḥmad Khān, the Bible upheld the Qur'anic viewpoint, and the biblical narrative was part of the larger story of Abrahamic religions narrated by the Qur'an. His work on the Bible later helped him in his Qur'an commentary, particularly when dealing with Qur'anic episodes whose details he found in the Bible. He also engaged with Muslim scholars, against the background of inter-faith polemics, on the issue of *tahrīf* ("distortion" or "alteration") in the Bible, which meant that it had been tampered with in order to change understandings of the original divine revelation.¹³ Building on earlier Muslim positions advanced by al-Rāzī and Walī Allāh, Aḥmad Khān insisted that *tahrīf* only meant change of meaning and not change in biblical words or verses.¹⁴ His work on the

¹³ Some of the Qur'anic verses that were read by Muslim scholars in connection with this issue of tampering with the Bible included: Q 2:75: "So can you [believers] hope that such people will believe you, when some of them used to hear the words of God and then deliberately twist them, even when they understood them?"; Q 2:79: "So woe to those who write something down with their own hands and then claim, 'This is from God,' in order to make some small gain. Woe to them for what their hands have written! Woe to them for all that they have earned!"

¹⁴ Christian missionaries were particularly antagonized because Aḥmad Khān was seen as attempting to prove that true Christianity did not differ substantially from true Islam. They also did not like his book because it repudiated the doctrine of the Trinity and condemned Christians for their rejection of the Prophet of Islam. See Alan M. Guenther, "Christian Responses to Ahmad Khan's Commentary on the Bible," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 6, no. 1-2 (2010): 67-100, doi:10.1558/cis.v6i1-2.67. Guenther noted that some people thought that Aḥmad Khān's work on the Bible lacked objectivity and sacrificed scholarship for political expediency.

Bible is generally understood in the context of his efforts to build inter-faith harmony and also to pave the way for better relations between Muslims and the British establishment after the Mutiny.

Aḥmad Khān's *tafsīr* saw its first volume published in 1879 and the last volume appeared after his death in 1898. Along with his *tafsīr*, he wrote a small treatise on the principles of interpreting the Qur'an under the title *Tahrīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* in 1892.¹⁵ Although this work was probably not very famous in his own lifetime, it encapsulated both the spirit of his exegetical enterprise as manifested in his earlier writings on the Qur'an and the intellectual tensions of his time. The immediate context of this publication was an exchange between Aḥmad Khān and his friend, Muḥsin al-Mulk, also known as Sayyid Mahdī °Alī Khān (d. 1907), who was a supporter of the Aligarh movement and a senior official in the princely state of Hyderabad. Muḥsin al-Mulk objected to the conclusions that Aḥmad Khān drew from the Qur'an in his *tafsīr*, and his objections resulted in an extended exchange of ideas between the two. After this initial exchange, Aḥmad Khān decided to write up his principles of exegesis in detail, which gained quite an attention in the post-independence period down to the present. In addition to these principles, Aḥmad Khān also wrote a letter to one of the founders of Deoband seminary, Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotwī on certain theological matters which Aḥmad Khān considered important for the interpretation of the Qur'an. Nānotwī replied to him in detail in around 1877, with the whole exchange happening earlier than *Tahrīr*. Thus, for reflecting on Aḥmad Khān's principles of interpretation, a study of all these exchanges and his small treatise is important. A

¹⁵ This treatise is often appended to the modern editions of Aḥmad Khān's *tafsīr*. It has also been published in Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 2 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, ca. 1963), 226-258.

review of his intellectual exchange with the two scholars will be presented after we study his principles and related parts of his *tafsīr*.

One major feature of *Tahrīr* was its author's engagement with the thought of Walī Allāh, in particular with the latter's *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* and *Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilahiyya*. On occasions, Aḥmad Khān built his argument on the eighteenth-century Delhi's savant, and at times he differed with him openly. This can usefully be kept in mind in the following paragraphs.

Aḥmad Khān's principles of interpretation can be divided into four categories. First is the category of his *theological principles*, that is, those that stem from his specific religious and philosophical view of God and His schemes for the world and for humans, which Aḥmad Khān examined in order to understand the Qur'an. In this regard, he subscribed to certain common elements of Muslim theology such as: that a Creator God exists (for Whose traits Aḥmad Khān quoted from the Qur'an, for example, from Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ (Q 112);¹⁶ that He sent messengers for man's guidance, and that the Prophet Muḥammad was the last of them; that the Qur'an is the word of God, revealed through the Prophet; that knowing God's traits, in actual knowledge, is not possible; that God's attributes are beings in themselves and thus emerge as a necessity of being (a line of thought that Aḥmad Khān developed by building on ideas from medieval debates and Walī Allāh).¹⁷ He further explained that although God is free to choose and make laws, once these laws or promises are made, then things happen according to them (in different domains). Thus, our established scientific discoveries are like recognizing His promises. In other words, *kalimāt Allāh* ("words of Allāh") and *khulq Allāh* ("creations of Allāh") are the same. His

¹⁶ The suras reads as: "1 Say, 'He is God the One, 2 God the eternal. 3 He begot no one nor was He begotten. 4 No one is comparable to Him.'"

¹⁷ The old theological debate was that whether God's attributes are a separate creation other than God or are a part of Him. Considering it separate or otherwise both raised certain theological questions.

sayings or words cannot be against His creations and work. Aḥmad Khān contended that even miracles could be explained through causation and history, an idea also subscribed to by Walī Allāh in some form.

The very first thing that strikes the mind of the reader who is trying to analyze these theological principles for understanding the Qur'an is Aḥmad Khān's emphasis on both rationality and the "supernatural". That is what led J.M.S. Baljon to characterize his religious and Qur'anic thought as "rational Supernaturalism".¹⁸ However, I would argue that putting stress on "supernaturalism" in Aḥmad Khān's thought needs to be further qualified. His view of supernaturalism seems to be subservient to his notion of human limitations. His writings implied that whatever was or is happening in the metaphysical world is beyond a man's capacity to know. It is only through engaging with God's word (the Qur'an) and works (the physical world governed by natural laws) that we can have a safe idea of divine guidance needed to excel in this world and the hereafter. Aḥmad Khān's engagements with theological ideas related to God's attributes were meant to simplify a believer's understanding, instead of delving into complex discussions around these concepts. Moreover, the idea of reconciling acts of God with His word was perceived as a radical articulation in Aḥmad Khān's times. His interlocutors, Muḥsin al-Mulk and Nānotwī, who debated with him on this issue, subjected him to sharp polemical attacks. Other opponents called him *nēcharī* ("naturalist") and deist for whom there was no active place for God in a world governed by natural laws and reason.¹⁹ However, Aḥmad Khān articulated his position very differently as will be explained below when we study his exchange with Muḥsin al-Mulk and Nānotwī. Aḥmad Khān wanted to engage with them in to order to

¹⁸ Baljon, *Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid*, 86.

¹⁹ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Dāfi' Al-Buhtān," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 11 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 7-50.

convey what he actually meant by this interpretive principle, and to impress upon them his conviction that he was by no means overwhelmed by European ideas or ideas resembling deism, despite his opponents' attempt to marshal this as a pretext to dismiss him or to adhere to their own positions.

The second category of Aḥmad Khān's major principles regarding the Qur'an must be understood as *messenger-centred*, including his ideas on the relationship between prophetology and the Qur'an. According to this approach, the Qur'an was revealed on the Prophet, either on his heart or through revelation (*waḥī*). In contrast to other scholars in India, who thought that the process of revelation happened through the mediation of the angel Gabriel, Aḥmad Khān thought that it happened due to the in-built prophetic capability (*malaka-yi nabuwwa*) with which the Prophet Muḥammad and other prophets were endowed, a capacity or ability that is termed as *rūḥ al-amīn* ("trustworthy spirit") in the Qur'an.²⁰ He also differed from those, including Walī Allāh, who thought that the Prophet used to receive only the theme of a revelation and that it was his role to turn it into Arabic words. For Aḥmad Khān, this seemed to go against both reason and any concrete appreciation of the revelatory process. In his eyes, the revelation of a theme can never make any sense without words. These messenger-centred principles tended to tacitly dismiss the idea of the Prophet's role in shaping the scripture as we have it today. Moreover, this line of reasoning, as will be explained below, was meant to counter the European criticism of the Qur'an which saw the Qur'an as a human product of the changing fortunes of the Prophet Muḥammad in Mecca and Medina.

²⁰ The verse that Aḥmad Khān was referring to reads: Q 26:192-195: "192 Truly, this Qur'an has been sent down by the Lord of the Worlds: 193 the Trustworthy Spirit brought it down 194 to your heart [Prophet], so that you could bring warning 195 in a clear Arabic tongue."

The third category of his principles affirmed Aḥmad Khān's *scripture-centred* historical view of the Qur'an in terms of its being an authentic text. His interpretive guidelines suggested that the Qur'an contains the truth and only the truth. He contended that arguing from extra-Qur'anic sources was not necessary to support what was in the Qur'an, as this method could instead impede recognition of the truth carried by God's book. However, he was not against relying on the tradition of pre-modern Qur'anic exegesis in order to begin an inquiry into the interpretation of the Qur'an. These scripture-centred principles also suggested that the Qur'an is still as pure as when it was revealed, and nothing has been lost. Moreover, it was revealed piecemeal over the lifetime of the Prophet. Therefore, it should not necessarily be read as a structured book in the fashion of contemporary works, although, some type of structure is discernible, alluding to the idea that Western criticism of the Qur'an is flawed. He stressed that any attempt to identify the immediate context of suras and passages should not be based on weak traditions. He also thought that the order of suras was *manṣūṣ* ("established" or "stipulated"), as opined by Walī Allāh as well, thus obviating any need to rearrange Qur'anic suras chronologically as they revealed, an approach advocated by Europeans such as Nöldeke. The thrust of these scripture-centred principles was to liberate the believing reader from attempting to construct far-fetched approaches to combat criticisms that the Qur'an had a "problematic" history and structure. He implied that there is no need to change the order of suras or to rely on weak exegetical traditions and inauthentic occasions of revelation to make it a smooth text. From this perspective, he did not strictly appear an apologist in the conventional sense of this epithet. What Aḥmad Khān wanted to say was that the text would guide the reader in its own specific ways despite having a form and structure unfamiliar to a nineteenth-century modern reader.

Although not a vocal advocate of the feature of *naẓm* in the Qur'an, he still accepted as valuable the pre-modern Arabic scholarship on this aspect of the Islamic scripture.²¹

Finally, there is the *linguistic category* of Aḥmad Khān's principles of interpretation. According to these principles, the Qur'an was revealed through the medium of eloquent Arabic, and thus, one needs to keep in mind the rules governing the specific type of diction and variety of Arabic used in the Qur'an. Moreover, he argued that there is no need to choose far-fetched meanings instead of what is apparent in the context of verses. Similarly, he stressed that one needs to decide a preferred meaning²² by taking into account the range of possible semantic meanings which include: synonymous meanings; figurative or literal meaning; any implied meanings; and hidden meanings. He explained his understanding of the Qur'an in the following way:

We believe that the glorious Qur'ān in its actual words (*bilughatihi*) is the speech of God. But when it is sent down in Arabic and in human language, i.e. in language understood by men, its meanings will be derived exactly as the meanings of (the speech of) an extremely eloquent speaker in Arabic. And just as men use trope, metaphor, allusions, similes, allegory, syllogistic argument, argumenta ad homines (*dalīl iqnā^cī?*), rhetorical argument, inductive argument and reductio ad absurdum (*ilzāmī*) in the same way we find these in the Qur'ān. Besides we have to ponder on those verbal and procedural (*amalī*) promises which God has laid down and have to look into that style of speech and manner of the use of words peculiar to the Qur'ān, and for which we have to seek the help of one verse to explain another.²³

He argued that, in the wake of the possible meanings of a verse, the chosen meaning should be what the context dictates. In addition, the discovered meaning should neither be counter to reason nor convey something that was not originally intended (*kalām ghayr maqṣūd*) in a given

²¹ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Qur'ān Janāb-i Payghambar-i Khudā par kis Ṭarḥa Nāzil hūā," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 11 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 525-526.

²² Aḥmad Khān implied that on occasions, this preferred meaning can accommodate other possible meanings and on other instances, this preferred meaning is judged as the "correct" meaning.

²³ The English translation is from Muhammad Daud Rahbar, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān's Principles of Exegesis - II," *The Muslim World*, 46, no. 4 (1956): 325-326. doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.1956.tb02936.x.

verse or a passage. Regarding this last aspect, he elaborated that on many occasions theological speculations, supposedly based on a given verse or vocabulary, had no evident basis in the verse. The linguistic principle with which Aḥmad Khān exerted his most energy was about his dismissal of *tā'wīl*, which he defined as an interpretation pursued in order to smoothen a text that features apparent contradictions or confusions. He believed that the Qur'an poses no such problems or any confusion unless extra-Qur'anic materials, such as the legends of the Jews, are linked to it.

The broad linguistic set of principles was by far the most contested aspect of his thought for his opponents. It appeared to them that Aḥmad Khān was arguing for a wholesale revisiting of the entire corpus of exegetical thought compiled over the centuries of the Muslim tradition. But when we look at his overall approach to the interpretation of the Qur'an, the objection was more of a polemic against him in personal terms than something based on a close study of his methods to understand the Qur'an. As I shall argue later, this polemic influenced secular academic characterizations of Aḥmad Khān as a modernist.

Experiencing Aḥmad Khān's Art of Interpretation

Other than analyzing his principles of interpretation, a direct reading from Aḥmad Khān's *tafsīr* can be our starting point to investigate the nature of his interpretive practice in his commentary. The following selections from his *tafsīr* illustrate some of the key facets of his art of interpretation:

*Translation of Aḥmad Khān's Tafsīr of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1)*²⁴

The English translation of the sura runs as follows:

1 In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! 2 Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, 3 the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, 4 Master of the Day of Judgement. 5 It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. 6 Guide us to the straight path: 7 the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.

His *tafsīr* begins:

In this sura, there is mentioned some praise for God, something about one's humility, and some elements of prayer [meaning the seeking of God's blessings] – hence, a prayer emanating from a worshipper's tongue. And no doubt, a man should seek God with such a kind of prayer. A prayer is always *mustajab* (“responded”) when it is made from the core of one's heart. But people make an error in understanding the goal of the prayer and meaning of the *istajābat* (“granting what is asked in the prayer”). They think that their need will be fulfilled for which they make their prayer. And they understand *istajābat* to mean the fulfilment of this purpose.²⁵

*Translation of Tafsīr of Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2)*²⁶

The first seven verses of Q 2 read as follows:

1-7: In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. 1 Alif Lam Mim 2 This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, 3 who believe in the unseen, keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them; 4 those who believe in the revelation sent down to you [Muhammad], and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the Hereafter. 5 Such people are following their Lord's guidance and it is they who will prosper. 6 As for those who disbelieve, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. 7 God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered. They will have great torment.

²⁴ For the excerpt from his *tafsīr* translated here, see Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 35.

²⁵ Aḥmad Khān's standpoint on seeking the blessings of God was based on a certain theological reasoning which his opponents disliked as being too logical (and thus could not be applied to God's acts), even though Aḥmad Khān's view differed not very significantly from his antagonists, according to my reading of his position. For him, a believer should not be disappointed if his prayer is not answered. Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Du'ā awr us kī Qabūliyat,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 55-64.

²⁶ The selections of the Urdu text for translation here are from Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 36-40.

Let us consider at some length Aḥmad Khān's *tafsīr* of these verses, in order to sample his methods of interpretation. The *tafsīr* begins:

This sura is among those thirty-nine suras whose names have been given by God Himself. These *ḥurūf-i muqatta'āt* ("disjointed letters")²⁷ are the names of those suras that begin with these *ḥurūf* ("letters"; singular: *ḥarf*). And those suras that are in harmony with each other have the same *ḥurūf* as their names. Now there are three things here that need to be considered. First, why do only these thirty-nine suras begin with these letters and why not others? Second, why have these letters been chosen to assign them certain names? Third, if some suras are given names in the form of letters, then why these specific letters been chosen for this purpose?

When we reflect on the Qur'an, it becomes glaringly evident that wherever God begins a sura in the manner of an oath, or a similar nature, He ascribes to this sura, on such an occasion, a particular name in the form of these letters, so that when that name is pronounced for that sura, it actually applies to the issue at hand, that is, the issue that is intended to be discussed [through the oath or a similar issue]. Those suras that do not carry this diction are not started with these types of names.

For example, the name of the sura that we are explaining here is Alif-Lām-Mīm [hereafter "ALM"]. Now God has started this sura by saying that it is the sura from the book of God (*dhālik al-kitāb*). Therefore, He uttered ALM as the name of the book. Hence ALM, which is the name of this sura, is the subject (*mubtadā'*); *dhālik* ("that") is the second subject (*mubtadā' thānī*) and *al-kitāb* ("writing" or "book") is its predicate (*khābar*). And this second subject and predicate combined together becomes the predicate of the first subject. Thus, ALM, that is, the sura's *musammā* ("that which is named" or "name") is the subject (*maḥmūl 'alayh*) of *dhālik al-kitāb* ("that is the writing").

This thing is also clear that if the names of these suras were based on some meaningful words, then the meanings of these words would have an impact on the understanding of *dhālik al-kitāb*, and it would have been difficult to treat *dhālik al-kitāb* in a pure manner as it was intended. That is the reason that God has chosen these letters as names, which is a kind of principle in linguistics and [it also explains that] they are devoid of any meaning as well. Hence, other than acting as *musammā*, there is no possibility of anything else.

However, it is difficult to resolve the issue of why these specific letters [and not other letters] have been ascribed to this sura. When somebody names something or someone, it is difficult to understand the reason or suitability of that name that resides in the heart of the man who names. For the same reason, it is difficult to

²⁷ These are Arabic letters that are found in the very beginning of certain Qur'anic suras. Muslim exegetes, over the centuries, have been struggling to understand their meanings and the reason of their inclusion in the text.

understand the reason behind God’s ascribing to a sura certain name; and thus, it is inevitable that scholars have disagreements on this issue. Consequently, there have been lots of disagreement on this. And some of them have said that the knowledge of this only resides with God. However, it is permissible for everybody to try to understand the suitability of these names according to his capacity. My understanding is that many times when Arab people used certain *hurūf muqatta‘āt*, they intended to signify something with these letters, such as we see in the Arabic couplet:

Qultu lahā qifī fa-qālat lī qāf (ق)
Lā taḥtasabī anā nasaynā al-ījāf

This means: I said to that woman who was riding on this she-bull: “Stop! Do not think that I forgot to move the she-bull”. She said “*qāf*” instead of *waqaftu* (“I stopped”). Hence, letter *qāf* signified the whole phrase “I stopped”.

In the suras (Baqara, Āl ‘Imrān, ‘Ankabūt, Rūm, Luqmān, Sajda), at whose beginning we have ALM as their name, God has impressed upon [His readers the message of] following His injunctions and commanding right and forbidding wrong. [In these suras], He has also presented the argument on His *tawḥīd* (the “oneness of God”) through highlighting the changing of days and nights and other signs of His control of the nature. And He has also mentioned the events at the time of death and afterwards. This is the reason that He has named all these suras with letters ALM, so that these three letters signify these elevated meanings (*maṭālib-i ‘aẓīma*). That is the reason that He has named all these suras with the same name.

...

The meaning of *lā rayba fīhi* (“there is no doubt in it”) in verse 2, as determined by earlier commentators, is that there is no doubt about this book being a divine book. It implies that the address is only to those who at the time of the revealing of the Qur’an were sceptical about it, and for making them believe, it is enough to mention that truth which is glaringly evident, without offering any evidence. This is known from our daily language usage that when something is too evident, then it is said: there is no doubt about that; afterwards, we present some evidence for that. But in my understanding, it is better to adopt other meanings instead of opting for the above meanings. Here God the Almighty has mentioned three groups: *mu‘minūn* (“believers”); *kuffār* (“those who deny” or “disbelievers”); and *munāfiqūn* (“hypocrites, that is, those who are disbelievers in their hearts but pretend on their faces”). Hence it is better to choose those meanings which represent the situation of these three groups. And these meanings are: for those who fear, that is, who are the believers, there is no doubt about this book as being divine; who believe in it and act according to its injunctions. Of these injunctions, the greatest are the ones related to the belief in God, saying ritual prayers, and giving away alms. And this thing is evident that those who believe in it will earn guidance from it, and those who do not believe, they will not reap guidance from it, despite the fact that it is, in fact, a guidance for everybody. It is like a medicine which can benefit everybody for a certain ailment; however, only those who use it can actually benefit from it....

[A specialist grammatical analysis begins] ...If we accept this meaning [of *lā rayba fīhi*], then the word *hudā* (“guidance”) acts as a *badal* (“substitute”) for *al-ḍamīr al-majhūl* (“the hidden pronoun”) that resides in *fīhi* (“in it”). And *jār wa majrūr* (“preposition and the word governed by the preposition”, that is *fīhi*), by acting as something established (*thābit*) or related to something existing (*kā’in*), falls as *khabar* of *lā nafī al-jins* (“the particle *lā* that negates its *ism* (“noun”) which is *rayba* (“doubt”)); hence, it would read: *lā rayba fī kawnihi hādiyan li-l-muttaqīn*, which means that for God-fearing believers, there is no doubt about the Qur’an as *the* guidance.

By *ghayb* (“unseen” in verse 3) we mean what is hidden from our eyes, but here it means the Pure Being Who, despite existing, is hidden from eyes and other senses, and is not and cannot be felt. And despite the fact that our reason corroborates that He exists, we cannot make sense of Him. In the explanation attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās²⁸, it is written: “and it is said that by *al-ghayb* is meant Allāh.” Hence, it means that God-fearing are those who believe in Allāh.

...

[In verse 7], debating on the issue of *jabr wa qadr* (“predestination” and “free will”) on the basis of these verses or similar verses is like going against the context of the Qur’an.²⁹ We cannot argue from these verses of the Qur’an about man’s being compelled or free to do what he does, neither about man being compelled to be in between *al-jabr wa al-qadr*. But it is regrettable that earlier ‘*ulamā’* have debated on this and have erroneously considered this issue as part of Islam, that is, [they believe that] it is supported by revelation or the Qur’an.

The above excerpts from Aḥmad Khān’s *tafsīr* bring to the fore certain key elements of his approach to interpreting the text. Foremost among them is his reliance on traditional understandings of the Qur’an as explicated in the pre-modern exegesis. The lines of interpretation that Aḥmad Khān followed were common in earlier commentaries, such as in the *tafāsīr* of al-Bayḍāwī and *al-Jalālayn*. This reliance on traditional lines of reasoning in interpreting the Qur’an can be noticed in his: analysis of Sūrat al-Fātiḥa; determination of the

²⁸ Ibn ‘Abbās (d. ca. 687) was a Companion of the Prophet, who is considered by Muslim scholars among the earliest of Qur’anic exegetes.

²⁹ Aḥmad Khān was hinting at his linguistic interpretive principle of not indulging in what is not intended in Qur’anic verses (*kalām ghayr maqṣūd*).

meaning of *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'āt*; interpretation of the semantics of *al-ghayb*; citation of Arabic poetry from pre-modern commentaries; and assessment of the signification of the phrase *lā rayba fīh*. In the case of the verse 2 where he was identifying different groups among the Prophet's audiences, he offered his exegesis on the canvas imbued with *asbāb* traditions. As will be explained further, reading Aḥmad Khān through the polemical lens worn by participants in the inter-school rivalries of the colonial period – participants such as the traditionalists of his day – results in obscuring what he actually intended to convey with his engagements with the Qur'an. Despite his criticism of the Muslim scholarly tradition on many occasions, it must be stressed that Aḥmad Khān was deeply rooted in his tradition. Polemics hurled at him were apparently aimed at glossing over the diversity of the Muslim tradition which Aḥmad Khān wanted to accentuate.

While having recourse to traditional ways of understanding the Qur'anic text, Aḥmad Khān's commentary admittedly also hints at his unease with certain Muslim theological engagements and with the tendency to bring extraneous theological matters, such as discussions of *jabr wa qadr* ("predestination and free will"), into discussions of otherwise unrelated Qur'anic verses. And yet, this approach clearly demonstrates the deepest respect for the Qur'an as a sacred scripture, as indeed does the strikingly rigorous treatment of Qur'anic vocabulary and phraseology found in Aḥmad Khān's commentary. Therefore, it seems that dismissing his exegetical positions just for his "unusual" conclusions was more of a polemical tactic on the part of his opponents than a sophisticated dialogue on Qur'anic hermeneutics, which Aḥmad Khān seriously desired. That is the fact that was highlighted in the exchange between Aḥmad Khān and his friend, Muḥsin al-Mulk, which we will discuss below. Aḥmad Khān clearly invited and encouraged his addressee to engage in a dialogue to develop some kind of agreed upon

principles of interpreting the Qur'an instead of debating unrelated issues. And that was the very idea that many of his traditionalist opponents abhorred, probably suspecting that it would open the Pandora's box of interpreting the Qur'an in the milieu of nineteenth-century historical criticism and critical thinking.

Appreciating Aḥmad Khān's Art of Interpretation The Meaning of *Malak* in the Qur'an

In many ways, Aḥmad Khān's interpretation of the word *malak* (plural: *malā'ika*), usually understood to mean "angel," in the Qur'an reveals the complexity and creativity of his interpretive approach in ways rarely discussed in earlier studies on him.³⁰ We will therefore explore this issue here and then return to its significance in the broad Indian Muslim context in Chapter Six. Academic readers of his *tafsīr* have mostly been intrigued by the apparently radical results of his exegetical analysis and, despite their intentions otherwise, have unintentionally portrayed him either as an antagonist to traditionalist thought in many hermeneutical situations or as an apologist for Islam in the wake of European intellectual assault. One can argue that Aḥmad Khān's method in determining the meaning of *malak* is one of the key sites where one can observe his in-depth technique in engaging with the Qur'an.

The Meaning of "Angels" in Religious Traditions

In stark contrast to the impression of the whimsicalness of his method of interpretation that his critics tried to convey when dismissing his position, Aḥmad Khān's engagement was quite complex and somewhat thorough in methodological terms. He began his investigation of

³⁰ This section of the chapter uses the following sources for investigating Aḥmad Khān's understanding of *malak* and the Creation story: Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 65-86. Additional treatment of the subject can be seen in Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Jibrā'īl wa Mīkā'īl awr Farishtoṅ kā Wujūd," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 158-176; Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Farishtoṅ awr Shayṭān kī Ḥaqīqat," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 177-185.

the meaning of the word “angel” by identifying what non-Muslim individuals and groups thought about it. Let us consider how Aḥmad Khān took stock of the possible Qur’anic meaning in this phase. He first highlighted that the basic meaning of the word in religious discourses referred to an “emissary” or a “messenger,” that is, someone who brought messages from God to humans. In the Old Testament, it was understood from some passages to mean an emissary but from others, it was interpreted as meaning a “cloud,” a “priest,” or even an “epidemic.” He also pointed out that the roots of the names, such as Gabriel and Michael, which are used for angels in the Bible, originally referred to qualities, and it was only later in Israelite history that these adjectival designations acquired the status of proper names for embodied creatures. Aḥmad Khān also thought that this later stress on their having an embodied existence could be attributed to the workings of the human psyche. He explained that the human psyche tries to imagine something that is beyond its grasp in terms of an embodied existence; thus, in the case of angels, humans conceived of them as something like white creatures, likened to snow, with lightening arms, crystal-like calves, and diamond-like feet – in a nutshell, gender-free attractive humans. Their place of abode was the sky, they possessed wings for commuting downwards and upwards, and had different assigned roles.

In contrast to this picture, which in his opinion emerged in the Old Testament, different nations had different views of angels. For some, angels had an embodied and bounded existence; others treated them as having an intangible existence. Some ancient idolaters thought of them as specific stars having names, such as Sa‘d and Nuḥās. Zoroastrians considered them as not having an embodied existence but as qualities springing from a positive source such as light, just like wisdom springs from the wise. Still others regarded them as minds or intelligences with varying degree of strength and devotion towards God. Some philosophers considered them as a

kind of creatures having good qualities. Jewish intellectual history depicted varied positions on the question of angels, ranging from imagining them as having an embodied existence to rejection of or not believing in angels, a position taken by the Sadducees. The Christian Gospels treated them as embodied creatures, with non-human essences, and other Christian scriptures remarked about the dwellers of Paradise as resembling angels. Arab idolaters took them as embodied creatures, having the nature of cosmic travellers.

Aḥmad Khān's Proposed Opinion

Based on his study of the Qur'an, Aḥmad Khān concluded that it is difficult to prove from the scripture that they are embodied creatures; instead, he saw some Qur'anic evidence going against this view, as will be explained below. Moreover, Aḥmad Khān opined that it is hard to find any conclusive evidence of their being superior to humans. Before we look further at how Aḥmad Khān interpreted the word *malak*, let us keep in sight the related Qur'anic verses (and the elements and vocabulary in them) that are important for understanding his position on angels and the larger Creation story (in which the role of angels is embedded). Consider the following verses:

Q 2: 30-39: 30 [Prophet], when your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth,' they said, 'How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?' but He said, 'I know things you do not.' 31 He taught Adam all the names [of things], then He showed them to the angels and said, 'Tell me the names of these if you truly [think you can].' 32 They said, 'May You be glorified! We have knowledge only of what You have taught us. You are the All Knowing and All Wise.' 33 Then He said, 'Adam, tell them the names of these.' When he told them their names, God said, 'Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?' 34 When We told the angels, 'Bow down before Adam,' they all bowed (*sajada*). But not Iblis, who refused and was arrogant: he was one of the disobedient. 35 We said, 'Adam, live with your wife in this garden (*janna*). Both of you eat freely there as you will, but do not go near this tree (*shajar*), or you will both become wrongdoers.' 36 But Satan made them slip, and removed them from the state they were in. We said, 'Get out, all of you! (*habūt*) You are each

other's enemy. On earth you will have a place to stay and livelihood for a time.' 37 Then Adam received some words from his Lord and He accepted his repentance: He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. 38 We said, 'Get out, all of you! But when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance, nor will they grieve— 39 those who disbelieve and deny Our messages shall be the inhabitants of the Fire, and there they will remain.'

Based on his reading of the Qur'an, Aḥmad Khān summed up his understanding of *malak* as follows. *Malā'ika* are God's grandeur and His powers that are manifested in nature, and the capabilities (*quwā*) that He has bestowed on all of His creations, including humans. And this definition extends to other qualities in His creation such as stability or strength (*ṣalābat*) of mountains; thinness or the softness of water; the ability of trees to grow; and the attraction and repulsion of electric current. In short, for Aḥmad Khan the term "angel" in the Qur'an encompassed all the abilities and characteristics with which creatures, including humans, are endowed. He further explained that man is comprised of both cosmic capabilities (*malakūtī*) and animal capabilities (*bahīmī*) – these two capabilities give rise to all sorts of good and evil. Thus, these are respectively man's angels and their progeny (that is, good abilities), and man's devils and their progeny (that is, bad abilities). Aḥmad Khān does not understand Satan and its progenies as having an embodied existence either.

Building on the Precedents from the Muslim Tradition

In contrast to the prevalent opinion among traditionalists that modernists like Aḥmad Khān did not revere the Muslim scholarly tradition, he clearly attempted to build his understanding on the earlier opinions of those Muslim scholars whose status had been established in the tradition. He built on the Andalusian mystic Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), the author of *Fuṣūṣ al-Hikam*, and the bearers of his intellectual tradition, which included his disciple, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 1274), and al-Qūnawī's disciple, Mūʿayyid al-Dīn Ibn Maḥmūd al-Jundī. Al-

Jundī was the author of a seminal work, *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, a commentary on Ibn ʿArabī. Al-Jundī called the universe *insān-i kabīr* (“man the great”) and humanity itself *insān-i saghīr* (“man the small”), explaining that human “powers” or “abilities” (*quwā*) are elements (*juzʾiāt*) of the universe, and their sum-total (*kulliyāt*) is *insān-i kabīr*. For Al-Jundī, some *quwā* of this *insān-i kabīr* are *malāʾika* (“angels”). Human *quwā* are subservient to their pertinent cosmic *quwā*; and even minor phenomena, like human sniffing, follow their pertinent *quwā* residing in cosmic *quwā*. There are two types of larger cosmic *quwā* of this *insān-i kabīr*: namely, *quwā ḥissiyya* (which pertains to senses and spirituality), and *quwā ḥaywāniyya* (which pertains to body). Aḥmad Khān further elucidated his position by referring to Sharf al-Dīn Dāʿūd al-Qayṣarī’s *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*. Al-Qayṣarī (d. 1350), building on a Qur’anic reference, considered Satan as among the progeny of *nafs-i ammāra* (literally “the soul that incites towards evil”). Aḥmad Khān informed readers that Al-Qayṣarī had found evidence in some sayings of the Prophet for this opinion. A prophetic tradition said: “Satan runs in man like blood.” Thus, engaging with these earlier opinions, mostly in the Sufī tradition, which his opponents like Thānawī also revered,³¹ Aḥmad Khān emphasized that his examination of these traditional opinions brought into relief the similarity to them of his own opinion on the meaning of *malak*; the apparent difference being merely one of scale, with both views compatible with the basic Qur’anic use of the term *malak* which referred to abilities and not to an embodied existence.

Linguistic Engagement

Aḥmad Khān attempted a thorough linguistic treatment of the word *malak* in the Qur’an, citing from the Muslim scholarly tradition as well. He said that if we accept that angels and

³¹ For Thānawī’s acknowledgment of these figures in the Muslim intellectual tradition, see Ashraf ʿAlī Thānawī, *Khuṣūṣ al-Kalim fī Ḥall Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (Lahore: Nazir Sons, 1978), 60-61.

devils keep a separate existence from humans, then the question arises: Did an argument or a debate really happened between God and angels in the manner in which it is conventionally understood in the story of Adam and Creation in the Qur'an? On this, Aḥmad Khān raised certain Qur'anic evidence by pointing out that the Qur'an says that angels cannot argue with God. He offered his basic understanding of the Creation story in which angels were among the key actors in the following manner:

The fact of the matter is that in these verses God is informing us about human nature and its emotions, and [the story] warns about the evil and animosity of *quwā bahīmiyya* (“animal capabilities”) that are lying in it.³² But this was a very subtle or nuanced (*daqīq*) secret that was very far from the intellect of ordinary people and camel-drivers [in the Prophet's first audiences].³³ That is why God explains this point through the medium [of a metaphorical story] regarding the [true] condition³⁴ of human nature, and through the story of Adam and Satan, or [we can say] as a debate between God and angels. This is to enable everybody to get the message from it, no matter whether he understands this secret of human nature or takes it [literally] as a debate between God and angels, or a dispute between God and Satan. This manner of getting the message of the Qur'an across for the wise and the simple-minded is [in itself] a grand miracle of the book.³⁵

With this in mind, Aḥmad Khān fleshed out his position further based on his engagement with the Qur'an. He stressed that examples presented in a text can be real or imaginary, and that the latter kind of things need not to be treated as real. – This will be tantamount to doing something as *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-mā lā yarḍā qā'ilahu* (“explaining the Qur'an by not what it actually says”). He elaborated this in the following words:

...explanation of meaning through the method of questioning and answering via tongues of His [non-human] creation is also found at another place in the Qur'an. It is in the Qur'an that God said through the [metaphorical] tongue of the earth: “When We asked the sky and the earth to be present, whether you like it or not, both said

³² In other words, in the Creation story, the voices in the dialogue are of “capabilities” and not of embodied creatures.

³³ Here Aḥmad Khān echoes Baden Powell's position (see chap. 2, 89)

³⁴ By “condition,” Aḥmad Khān meant the real nature of humans in which they have certain capabilities called *malā'ika*.

³⁵ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, vol. 1, 71-72.

that we are here with pleasure.” Something similar was said regarding Hell: “On the day when We will ask Hell whether you are satisfied [with what you have received in terms of the number of the wicked]? Then Hell will reply that it needs more than that.” Hence, in these verses, God the Almighty explained the nature of things via their [imaginary tongues] through the use of question and answer.³⁶

In the light of this, Aḥmad Khān clarified regarding the verse 30, where God said: *idhā qāla rabbuka li-l-malā'ika* (“when your Lord said to the ‘angels’”), that there is no need for us to treat *malā'ika* as real and embodied creatures. Aḥmad Khān further substantiated his argument by referring to the Qur’anic exegetical tradition and cited a pre-modern Sufi commentary entitled *Tafsīr Kashf al-Asrar* as offering a similar metaphorical reading of the Creation story.³⁷

In addition to this treatment of the word *malak*, Aḥmad Khān narrowed his focus onto the place of Adam in the Creation story and its possible link with the meaning of *malak*. He began by slowly and steadily analysing the Qur’anic vocabulary involved in the episode. Building on al-Bayḍāwī’s *tafsīr*, Aḥmad Khān said that the verb *‘allama* (literally “to teach”) means endowing Adam with those capabilities he referred to as angels and devils. *Ādam* (“Adam”) in the story means humankind as other exegetical works such as *Kashf al-Asrār* had suggested. The word *asmā’* (“names”) is not to be taken literally to mean names but rather as it was explained by al-Bayḍāwī. He paraphrased al-Bayḍāwī: “It did not refer to the names of things not existing at the time of the dialogue in the Creation story, but the *quwā* that man was endowed with, including his reasoning abilities, which enable man to infer results from a sign or a piece of evidence.”³⁸ Aḥmad Khān further noted that *Kashf al-Asrār* explained this in a similar fashion and more clearly. He paraphrased it: “It means that God created those capabilities in man

³⁶ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 72.

³⁷ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 73.

³⁸ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 75.

through which he can understand everything and draw [conclusions] from evidence and argument.”³⁹

Furthermore, Aḥmad Khān discussed the verse 31 in grammatical terms, by noting that the referent of the pronoun, “them,” in *‘aradahum* (“He offered them” or “He showed them”) is not clearly stipulated in the text of the Qur’an. Many exegetes had connected this plural pronoun with the signified intended in *asmā’*. In that case, he objected, the pronoun should have been feminine according to the rules of Arabic grammar. He mentioned that al-Bayḍāwī, being familiar with this linguistic complexity, solved this problem by assuming that *asmā’* included both intelligent and non-intelligent beings. Thus, the male pronoun used for intelligent beings was meant to cover non-intelligent beings as well. Taking this lead from al-Bayḍāwī, Aḥmad Khān tried to clarify the matter further, concluding that the plural pronoun refers to human beings in the plural. Thus, whereas in the earlier part of the verse Adam was used in singular, in the latter part of the verse under study, Adam was referred to in plural. In short, *‘aradahum* means, according to Aḥmad Khān, “God presented mankind in the plural before ‘angels’”.

In addition to the above treatment of the specific Qur’anic vocabulary, Aḥmad Khān further built on his understanding of other key words involved in the Creation episode such as *sajda* (“prostration, for instance, in prayer”); *janna* (“paradise”); *shajar* (“tree”); *habūṭ* (“descent of man”).⁴⁰ In sum, Aḥmad Khān did not from the very beginning take this story as a matter of fact but interpreted it in a metaphorical sense. He, thus, translated the Creation story from the Qur’anic Arabic in the following manner:

And [remember] when your Lord told angels that “I am going to make a successor on the earth”; [whereupon] angels [as abilities] said: “Are You going to make a

³⁹ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 74-75.

⁴⁰ For these Arabic terms, refer above to the translation of the Creation story in the Qur’an.

successor who will create chaos and shed blood on the earth? And we praise You all the time and remember You as our Holy Lord.” He said, “I know what you know not.” And (Allāh) endowed Adam with all the names [that is, capabilities]. He, then, presented them (Adam, i.e., human beings in general) before angels and He said, “Tell me their names (that is, all their realities and abilities), if you are truthful.” Angels said: “You are Pure and Great; we only know what you taught us; You are the Wise and All-Knowing.” He said: “O Adam, tell their (that is, angels’) names (that is, their) own abilities and realities [which they knew not] to them (that is, angels).”⁴¹

Aḥmad Khān further explained that this part of the Creation story implied that God scolded angels on their questioning Him for making a successor and instead He asked them about their own abilities which they did not know, and it was Adam who told the angels about their own selves.

Aḥmad Khān’s Linguistic Treatment of Other Qur’anic Sites

The second aspect of Aḥmad Khān’s Qur’anic project was his rethinking and re-investigating the meaning of Qur’anic vocabulary, phrases, and verses. But this “rethinking” and “re-investigation” was less in relation to the pre-modern tradition and more in relation to the contemporary intellectual positions in colonial India on religious issues, that is, the contemporary positions he wanted to get rid of. In the light of our above reading of some of his interpretive practices, one can hardly say that he wanted to challenge everything that had been said before on the meaning of the Qur’an, and that he intended to read the scripture directly. Indeed, he showed clear and very strong reliance on earlier works of *tafsīr*. What he actually seems to have intended was to keep his interpretive practice open in order to continue to reflect on what the Qur’an might possibly mean in every era, given emerging new ways of reflecting on

⁴¹ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 64-71. Here I have translated from Aḥmad Khān’s rendering of the Arabic Qur’an into Urdu, along with his interpretive suggestions added to the literal translation. The parentheses in the above translation are Aḥmad Khān’s interventions.

the world and society. But his attempt to revisit what had apparently been “settled” in the previous Muslim scholarly tradition was at the heart of the dispute between the so-called modernist Aḥmad Khān and his traditionalist opponents. What Aḥmad Khān emphasized was the need to make any linguistic investigation of the Qur’an subservient to the scriptural text alone, not by relinquishing the earlier exegetical tradition but by not allowing it to play the decisive role in determining the meaning of the Qur’an. This emphasis on the original text was an approach that, to him, was already the hallmark of the Muslim intellectual tradition. Another aspect of this linguistic investigation, for Aḥmad Khān, was to highlight the diverse nature of the earlier Muslim exegetical tradition in particular and the larger Muslim religious tradition in general. For traditionalists, this nature of tradition was not to be substantially disputed, and it could be seen as coherent and converging, or at least something that could be harmonized in the wake of any apparent contradictions; whereas Aḥmad Khān attempted to bring to light all the plurality and diversity of positions on interpretive and other religious matters. It also looked that on many occasions he found the tradition as fluid and accommodating while the contemporary Muslim positions in colonial as unflinchingly fixated on their standpoints. By giving a quick look at some more examples from Aḥmad Khān’s engagements with the Qur’an, we can gain a clearer idea of what a proper relationship with the tradition actually meant in his thought.

In the case of the Qur’anic phrase, *istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh* (literally, “to sit firmly on the throne”),⁴² Aḥmad Khān outlined the whole tradition of its exegesis.⁴³ He identified two types of

⁴² Aḥmad Khān was referring to the verse: Q 7:54: “Your Lord is God, who created the heavens and earth in six Days, then established Himself on the throne; He makes the night cover the day in swift pursuit; He created the sun, moon, and stars to be subservient to His command; all creation and command belong to Him. Exalted be God, Lord of all the worlds!”

⁴³ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Istiwā ‘alā al-‘Arsh sē kayā Murād hay?” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 190-210.

places where the word *‘arsh* (“throne”) had been used in the Qur’an: first, places where the word had been used alone like *al-‘arsh al-‘aẓīm* (“the great throne”);⁴⁴ and second, sites where it was used in such phrases as *istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*. He noted that in the instances where the word was used alone, exegetes, in general, understood it as an object existing outside the universe and having a gigantic body; however, when they came to interpret the word in the phrase, *istawā ‘alā al-‘arsh*, they interpreted it metaphorically and thus understood the phrase as saying: “God’s dominance or control (*istīlā*) of His kingdom (*al-‘arsh*).” Aḥmad Khān raised the question of why if the word could be interpreted metaphorically in the second instance, could it then not be understood in the same figurative vein in the first instance. He further reminded the reader of this unsettled debate on the relevant Qur’anic verses, which was thought by traditionalists to have been settled, by noting that there had been a dispute on this very question between pre-modern exegetes, al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī, in earlier centuries.

Similarly, in the case of the word *samāwāt* (literally “heavens”) as used in the Qur’an,⁴⁵ Aḥmad Khān argued that the Muslim tradition was, in general, more influenced by Greek astronomical tradition and thus, interpreted it as “skies.” That is, earlier exegetes manifested a contradiction by choosing a word that came from the Qur’an but interpreted it according to the tradition of Greek astronomy. He, on the contrary, stressed that the correct method was to see how the Qur’an had originally applied the word in its own discourses. He found that according to the Qur’an it simply meant a multi-layered vastness (*sāt bulandiyān* - “seven heights”). He further reminded the reader that this semantic position had already been taken by al-Bayḍāwī in

⁴⁴ See Q 9: 129: “If they turn away, [Prophet], say, ‘God is enough for me: there is no god but Him; I put my trust in Him; He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne.’”

⁴⁵ The Qur’an uses the word in Q 2:29: “It was He who created all that is on the earth for you, then turned to the sky and made the seven heavens [*samāwāt*]; it is He who has knowledge of all things.”

earlier centuries. In this way, Aḥmad Khān implied that criticizing him for “linguistic heresy” on such matters was tantamount to foregoing many established authorities of the Muslim tradition, whose teachings were taught in traditionalist madrasas over the centuries.

Aḥmad Khān extended this hermeneutical thinking, with the same rigour that we saw in the case of *malak*, to a range of matters disputed in the tradition of Qur’anic exegesis, such as those related to Qur’anic vocabulary and phrases including: *āsmān kē burj* (literally “towers of the sky”);⁴⁶ *rajm-i shayāaṭīn* (literally “throwing stones at devils”);⁴⁷ *ḥaqīqat-i rawyā’* (“the reality of dreams”);⁴⁸ the nature of the Prophet’s Ascension (*mi^crāj*) to the heavens;⁴⁹ the creation of Adam in the Qur’an; the meaning of the Qur’anic verses that supposedly prove that the earth is stationary;⁵⁰ and the participation of angels in the battle of Badr that was fought during the time of the Prophet.⁵¹

In general, Aḥmad Khān’s interpretive practice was intended to excavate what Qur’anic words and expressions meant for the sacred book’s earliest readers during the time of the Prophet. Moreover, he acknowledged the possibility of there being distinct meanings for two

⁴⁶ Some of the places where the phrase is used are: Q 15:16-18: “16 We have set constellations up in the sky and made it beautiful for all to see, 17 and guarded it from every stoned Satan: 18 Any eavesdropper will be pursued by a clearly visible flame”; Q 85: 1-6: “1 By the sky with its towering constellations, 2 by the promised Day, 3 by the Witness and that which is witnessed, 4 damned were the makers of the trench, 5 the makers of the fuel-stoked fire!”

⁴⁷ Q 67: 5: “We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them [missiles] for stoning devils for whom We have also prepared the torment of a blazing fire.”

⁴⁸ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Ḥaqīqat-i Rawyā’,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 222-244.

⁴⁹ The related verse is: Q 17:1: “1 Glory to Him who made His servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs: He alone is the All Hearing, the All Seeing.”

⁵⁰ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Al-Arḍ Laysat bi-Sākina,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 4 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1988), 51-57.

⁵¹ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Ghazwa Badr awr Nuzūl-i Malā’ika,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 14 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 407-418. For a related Qur’anic verse see Q 8:9-10: “9 When you begged your Lord for help, He answered you, ‘I will reinforce you with a thousand angels in succession.’ 10 God made this a message of hope to reassure your hearts: help comes only from God, He is mighty and wise.”

different sets of readers: the simple-minded, who were on an earlier stage of human progress; and advanced-educated minds, who were familiar with new intellectual developments around them. In the case of settling the meaning of *muḥkamāt* (“clear verses”) and *mutashābihāt* (“allegorical verses”), he accepted the possibility that the meaning of the latter term can be understood in different manners by the first and the second types of readers. However, the basic aim of such verses, he maintained, remained the same for all types of readers.

What led Aḥmad Khān to think about issues like the interpretation of *malak* and other Qur’anic vocabulary and phrases in the way he did? His answer lies in the beginning of his *tafsīr*. From the very beginning, he was concerned with investigating the issue of the compatibility or incompatibility of established scientific facts (and scientific thinking) with Qur’anic ideas. As a scholar educated in the traditional Islamic sciences, Aḥmad Khān was also aware of traditional resources to interpret the Qur’an, including analyzing occasions of revelations, and considering Jewish legends and Muslim exegetical traditions. Against this background, he opened the Qur’an with a view to assess the situation for himself. A serious problem with earlier academic work on Aḥmad Khān is that it focused so much on his final results in determining the meanings of Qur’anic vocabulary and phrases, and their theological implications. While his approach might have been problematic in certain respects (e.g. regarding Arabic linguistics or hermeneutics in general), it was not deficient in rigour, nor was it simply an effort to mould religion according to the dictates of scientific thinking, an accusation which his critics often hurled at him. Rather, his investigation was multi-layered. He was performing three tasks on many occasions while interpreting the Qur’anic text. He would characteristically begin with researching what had been generally said on a particular issue such as on angels. In the next phase, he would take stock of diverse Muslim understandings on a specific issue. Finally, he

would offer his own understanding by focusing on the Qur'anic text as well as by considering earlier traditions.

In addition to pursuing his multi-layered approach, Aḥmad Khān also aimed at re-investigating⁵² the whole Muslim tradition. He also seemed to imply that this “reviewing” or “stock-taking” had been a process seen repeatedly throughout the development of Muslim intellectual thought. By engaging with the work of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), in particular his work *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa Bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*, Aḥmad Khān tried to highlight that such instances of reviewing, as done by al-Ghazālī, had occurred throughout the tradition. Moreover, Aḥmad Khān's engagement with al-Ghazālī was aimed at his contemporaries in British India to rethink the notions of orthodoxy and heresy, since al-Ghazālī himself had focused on this issue in the wake of criticism of him by groups of Asha'arī theologians.⁵³ Aḥmad Khān attended to such recurring re-investigations of the Muslim scholarly tradition precisely in order to bring to the fore the diversity and multiplicity of positions that had existed all along Muslim intellectual history. The question of whether to conceal this diversity or highlight was a key stake in the polemics between traditionalists and modernists in nineteenth-century colonial India.

Colonial India and Aḥmad Khān's Exegetical Ideas

In the light of our previous remarks on Aḥmad Khān's interpretative principles and his *tafsīr*, we can attempt to uncover the underlying historical forces that directly influenced or

⁵² The words like “revisiting,” “rethinking,” or “reinterpretation” seem unsuitable to reflect these historical processes because these words, often used by academics, are rooted in the polemics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I will discuss Aḥmad Khān's approach in more detail in Chapter Six when I discuss the notion of “tradition”. In my opinion, Aḥmad Khān was more interested in rethinking current positions in colonial India than in challenging pre-modern opinions.

⁵³ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa par aēk Naẓar” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 3 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1984), 112-175.

shaped his work and consider the impact his own opinions had on his intellectual milieu. We begin by examining the impact of his short treatise on Qur'anic hermeneutics, *Tahrīr fī 'Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, which we discussed above. *Tahrīr* by all means was a remarkable nineteenth-century blueprint of Qur'anic hermeneutics. Although, as a small document, it did not directly occasion many debates around understanding the Qur'an, it was the synopsis of his thinking about interpreting the Qur'an which he expressed at length in his *tafsīr* and other writings. Moreover, the document also highlighted the intellectual issues at stake in the polemics and intellectual disputes between modernists and traditionalists. In addition, for a historian, studying Aḥmad Khān's principles in their colonial context can help bring to light the underlying intellectual transformations related to the Islamic disciplines that were occurring and the new currents of thought that were struggling to be born. In terms of Aḥmad Khān's theologically informed hermeneutics, the atmosphere of debate within and among the Abrahamic faiths and the struggle between science and religion typical of the nineteenth century all played a role in conceiving these principles. In addition, the air of intra-Sunni sectarianism was equally powerful in forcing activists like Aḥmad Khān to think of ways to bring the intelligentsia and the masses together around a common Islamic platform. In this regard, he thought that the Qur'an could act as a pivot to bind the diverse parts of the community together. Thus, he stressed on belief in God and trust in His Word as the only means to escape the intellectual chaos hovering over the Muslim community. This phenomenon of taking the Qur'an as the foundation of all religious knowledge seemed to a great extent a new phenomenon, despite some foreshadowing in the thought of Walī Allāh in the eighteenth century and in the pre-modern tradition. This commitment had a further influence on the development of his *messenger-centred* and historical principles to reflect upon the Qur'an. It informed Aḥmad Khān's thinking on the hermeneutics-related questions of how to

make sense of the process of revelation and of the composition and arrangement of the Qur'an. However, his insistence on the Qur'an as an authentic source of Islam should not be interpreted, as seen in Zaman's configuration of modernists, as his belittling the intellectual tradition. The two issues were related and unrelated in complex ways as this chapter highlights at different points.

Furthermore, his linguistic principles seem to be the apex of his efforts to establish working guidelines to deal with and interpret the text of the Qur'an. For him, any effort to make the scripture a decisive force in religious matters had to rely on clear linguistic principles to make proper sense of the text. A careful look at the nature of the linguistic principles he devised brings to light the tension between the Muslim scholarly tradition that the community inherited and the modern expectation that the scripture itself would play a key role in clarifying the divine meaning. While that tension hinted at the many debates and controversies that were part of the traditional sciences of the Qur'an, it offered the possibility of somehow escaping the intellectual challenges of earlier centuries. Behind the linguistic tensions was often the idea or assumption of a single agreed upon tradition (or at least a common agreed upon thread within the tradition) which traditionalists perceived to have been preserved by generations of Muslim scholars.⁵⁴ What this idea effectively obscured was the marked diversity and variety already existent in the tradition. It was this diversity that Aḥmad Khān made the launching site of his hermeneutics.

Intra-Faith Rivalries

Two specific exchanges that Aḥmad Khān had with his contemporaries help us in reconstructing the intellectual milieu in which his new Qur'anic hermeneutics was struggling to

⁵⁴ How far this impression was based on the principles of interpretation outlined by Ibn Taymiyya in the fourteenth century in his *Muqaddima fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* is an important question that must be explored elsewhere.

gain a solid position. The first exchange, which initiated in 1892, was with Muḥsin al-Mulk, an official in the princely state of Hyderabad and a renowned Muslim religious and political figure;⁵⁵ the second was with Nānotwī of the Deoband school.⁵⁶ Muḥsin al-Mulk, who was not his opponent but a critical friend, objected to Aḥmad Khān's interpretive methods in two ways. First, he criticized Aḥmad Khān's interpretation for going against what was intended by the divine author. Second, he took issue with what he alleged was the exegete's unconditional borrowing of ideas from critics of religion and supporters of science. In Muḥsin al-Mulk's opinion, using the terms of the supporters of science was like dismissing the whole narrative of the Abrahamic religions. Aḥmad Khān's reply undertook to clarify his own position by pointing out the wrong direction of his opponent's argument for its unfounded assumptions about him. Thus, while Muḥsin al-Mulk placed his interlocutor in the category of naturalists (in the sense of materialists (*dahriyūn*)), Aḥmad Khān explained that he did not identify himself as such. Aḥmad Khān did not have a fixed view of science, and he implied in his reply recognition of a difference between a scientific theory and an established scientific truth. On the issue of whether any Qur'anic meaning is against the intention of the divine author, he asked Muḥsin al-Mulk: What is the criterion to decide that an interpretation is against God's will? In other words, he perhaps wanted to make the practice of interpretation a human affair. Muḥsin al-Mulk had earlier explained that his view of divine intention in the text of the Qur'an was based on what

⁵⁵ For this exchange of letters between Aḥmad Khān and Muḥsin al-Mulk on the topic of Qur'anic interpretation, see *Khaṭūṭ ba-Nām-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1995), 140-238; Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maktūbāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 1 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1976), 480-523. This exchange was also separately published under the title *Mukātabāt al-Khulān*, ed. Muḥammad °Uthmān Maqbūl (Aligarh: Aḥmadī Press, 1915).

⁵⁶ For their exchange of letters, see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān to Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotwī via Pīr Muḥammad °Ārif, n.d., in *Maktūbāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 2 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1985), 55-59; Muḥammad Qāsim Nānotwī to Sayyid Aḥmad Khān via Pīr Muḥammad °Ārif, n.d., in *Khaṭūṭ ba-Nām-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1995), 100-135. The whole exchange has also been published from the platform of Deoband under the title *Taṣfiyat al-'Aqā'id*. The above *maktūbāt* ("letters") of Aḥmad Khān note the date of the publication of *Taṣfiya* as 1887.

was understood by the Prophet, his Companions, Muslim scholarship, and the larger Muslim population. This divinely intended meaning should also be in line with the Arabic idiom and the context of the text. On this, Aḥmad Khān, being confident of his interpretive method that envisaged earlier opinions, threw the ball back into his critic's court by replying that there is no use of making such a general claim without citing any specific illustration from his commentary. In short, Aḥmad Khān remained confident that he had not violated any "established" principles of arriving at the meaning of the Qur'an.

Earlier in 1877, Aḥmad Khān had a significant exchange of religious views with Nānotwī. The matters they debated were not strictly exegetical, but the debate brought to the surface many of the central issues lying at the heart of Muslim inter-school polemics in colonial India and did so in the context of controversies on Qur'anic hermeneutics. First, this debate highlighted the central problems of defining what was meant by the "nature" and "acts" of God and what is meant by the term "rational". To Nānotwī, any unfinished scientific project (*sukhn-i nātāmām*) could not be taken to have actually established a fact of nature. This position seems to have been a polemical tactic on the part of Nānotwī to dismiss his opponent's position, since Aḥmad Khān had never claimed to use any unproven fact of science in support of his arguments for determining Qur'anic meaning. Second, while admitting that there was no difference of opinion on the issue of the Qur'an's superiority over extra-Qur'anic religious sources – something apparently problematic to traditionalists who were unwilling to articulate this so clearly – Nānotwī qualified his statement by noting that there had been a contention in the Muslim tradition over the criteria to decide whether some ḥadīth or some extra-Qur'anic report or any dictate of reason was at odds with the Qur'an. He implied that determining these criteria had always been a specialist's domain in the history of the tradition, and thus suggesting that, by

this standard, Aḥmad Khān lacked such advanced scholarly (and by extension, spiritual) credentials.⁵⁷ Third, related to the second point, it was clear that a specific historical understanding of Muslim intellectual history was at play in Nānotwī's rebuttal of Aḥmad Khān's position. It was Nānotwī's assumption that the pre-modern Muslim tradition had settled difficult exegetical issues through accepting the views of reliable authorities and that "amateurs" like Aḥmad Khān were in no way comparable to them or suitable to offer opinions. Earlier Aḥmad Khān had argued that all such interpretive issues had been open for debate and for further intellectual development throughout the centuries of the Muslim tradition and that it was simply a matter of traditionalist hypothesis that these were undisputed.⁵⁸

Related to such polemics, as manifested in the above exchanges, was the issue of how to read and understand an opponent's argument in colonial India. While replying to two of his famous traditionalist critics, °Alī Bakhsh and Imdād °Alī, who were both judges in the colonial administration, Aḥmad Khān constantly lamented misperceptions of him by the opponents who portrayed him wrongly by ascribing to him statements he never uttered, including the statement that he privileged reason and nature over religion and the Qur'an.⁵⁹ Moreover, debates about the literal and figurative meanings of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses depicted the crisis of authority among Muslim schools of thought. To Nānotwī, Aḥmad Khān's stress on the need to identify instances where the Qur'anic meaning is literal or figurative was valid, but he objected to the

⁵⁷ See Chapter Two on Walī Allāh's claim of his *wahbī* (God-given) credentials to interpret the Qur'an.

⁵⁸ See Aḥmad Khān's long essay on al-Ghazālī's *Al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* in which he explains how al-Ghazālī's position regarding what is heresy and what is orthodoxy in theological matters, in the wake of Asha'rite criticism of him, was still relevant in the milieu of colonial India. He implied that this polemical tactic (of playing a "blame-game") had been a persistent feature of the Muslim intellectual tradition, along with intellectual creativity. See Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa par aēk Nazar."

⁵⁹ Aḥmad Khān, "Dāfi °Al-Buhtān," 7-50. Also see Shaista Azizalam, "Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and the °Ulamā': A Study in Socio-political Context" (master's thesis, McGill University, 1992). °Alī Bakhsh Khān wrote two books, *Tā'īd al-Islām* and *Shahāb-i Thāqib*, which were based on the *fatāwā* that he sought from Meccan scholars against Aḥmad Khān. Imdād °Alī wrote *Imdād al-Āfāq bi-Rajm Ahl al-Nifāq*. See Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd*, 539-565.

amateur method of settling those disputes, method that he ascribed to persons like Aḥmad Khān who, Nānotwī assumed, were not intellectually equipped to render proper judgments.

In addition to these inter-school and Muslim internal polemics that hint at the larger atmosphere in colonial India and also at the significance of Aḥmad Khān's Qur'anic project, the tension between the dictates of science and faith was instrumental in leading Aḥmad Khān to correlate acts of God with the word of God. The European context in general and the British Indian context in particular played a key role in the colonies, where movements to reconcile the two outlooks on life were already underway. In the following subsection, we discuss this and related issues.

Aḥmad Khān's View of Science

That Aḥmad Khān was aware of the larger milieu of struggle between science and religion in Britain and elsewhere in Europe is corroborated by different sources. His commentary on the Bible engaged with the work of John Pratt, the archdeacon of Calcutta, who was actively in dialogue and debate with such works as *Essays and Review*, which has been discussed in Chapter Two. Moreover, Aḥmad Khān's own efforts to build a new education system featuring a curriculum in scientific disciplines made it quite clear why he was interested in this question of the theoretical relationship between science and religion. One of the primary reasons for him to write a commentary on the Qur'an was his feeling that a new education in scientific disciplines would erode the religious beliefs of students if their questions were not addressed. Furthermore, the connected issue of historical criticism of the Bible also drew his notice, as Avril Powell highlights in her comparison between Kayrānwī, the famous participant in the Agra debate with Christians, and Aḥmad Khān concerning their sources of knowledge on biblical studies. Aḥmad

Khān himself wrote about the sources of his knowledge when writing his commentary of the Bible. He mentioned that among the books he arranged for his study and preparation were those written by non-conformists and critics of the Bible. Other studies have identified all the sources that he used in his commentary of the Bible.⁶⁰ In addition to the issues related to science and historical criticism, European scholarship on the Qur'an and Islam, in particular Muir's work, was one of the key drivers of his thinking on the Qur'an. Below we explain the larger impact these milieux had on him and his responses to them. Further examination of his work will be given in Chapter Six where we compare and contrast the views of different exegetes and Qur'anic thinkers.

Let us concentrate here on Aḥmad Khān's stress on reconciling science and religion, a feature of his thought that originated from the larger context of the nineteenth-century development of modern sciences. As he himself explained, Aḥmad Khān meant by modern sciences three types of disciplines:⁶¹ 1) Sciences such as geology and the study of electricity, which were present neither in ancient Greek history, nor in the history of the Islamic sciences; 2) Sciences such as astronomy (*‘ilm-i hay’at*) and chemistry, which were present in both the ancient Greek and Islamic periods but with the foundations that had been proven wrong; 3) Sciences such as mechanics (*‘ilm-i ālāt* or *‘ilm-i jarr-i thaqīl*) and mathematics, which existed in both of the earlier periods but had undergone immense development in the modern period.

In treating the development of sciences in earlier human and specifically Muslim history, Aḥmad Khān explained the importance of reconciling between science and religion in one of his

⁶⁰ Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries*, 231-233 (see chap. 2, n. 6). Powell's work built on an earlier work, R.G. Schaefer, "Studies in Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Use of some Christian Writers in his Biblical Commentary" (master's thesis, Hartford Seminary, 1966).

⁶¹ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Ulūm-i Jadīda," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 7 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1991), 211-212.

writings. He outlined a brief, simplified history of the development of Islamic religious disciplines.⁶² In his view, this development or evolution underwent five phases that showed how it evolved from the simple to the complex. Its earliest phase saw the gathering of the Qur'an at one place during the early caliphate; in the second, the sayings of the Prophet were collected in Ḥadīth books; the third stage witnessed the development of early theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*); in the fourth, the Muslim sciences further evolved with the translation of Greek scientific texts, whose Muslim readers, he noted, were often labelled as *kāfir* (“non-believer”); finally, the evolution of the Islamic religious disciplines produced the work of those, like al-Ghazālī, who attempted to harmonize *manqūlāt* and *maʿqūlāt*. Having presented this simplified history, Aḥmad Khān emphasized that in modern times, there was a need to further develop the Muslim sciences on two lines. First, Muslims should study modern philosophy just as they had studied Greek philosophy in the earlier centuries of Muslim intellectual history. Second, Muslims should attempt to harmonize the modern sciences (*maʿqūlāt-i jadīda*) with the Islamic traditional sciences (*manqūlāt*) in a manner similar to what earlier generations of Muslims had done in the case of reconciling the Greek sciences (*maʿqūlāt-i yūnāniyya*) with the Islamic *manqūlāt*. However, in his emphasis on modern philosophy and science, there was no movement or stress in his thought to make religious knowledge subservient to philosophy and science, an accusation thrown at him by the opponents like ʿAlī Bakhsh and Imdād ʿAlī. Instead, his outlook envisioned a lively engagement between different domains of knowledge. Aḥmad Khān foresaw the controversy that this new approach would result in, but he encouraged this thinking in the hope that just as the pre-modern intellectuals, such as al-Ghazālī, who pursued such an

⁶² Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Taraqqī-yi ʿUlūm,” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismāʿīl Pānīpatī, vol. 7 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1991), 213-215.

enterprise, were later celebrated in the tradition, their modern counterparts would meet the same glorious fate at some point in the future. He also reminded his opponents in another writing that in al-Ghazālī one could see a common motif in Muslim intellectual history, namely that the “heretics” of one age came to be received as “orthodox” or “established” in later periods.

In addition to his above points on the issue of reconciling religion with science, Aḥmad Khān further explained it with reference to his stance on the nature of miracles (singular: *mu‘jiza*).⁶³ For him, almost all the events in Qur’anic stories that had been conventionally interpreted as miracles could be explained by identifying a probable cause and effect within the constraints of natural laws, which are ultimately controlled by God. This very idea was already gaining ground in Europe, where the publication in England of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 was a milestone. A quick look at the following quote from Baden Powell’s essay in that collection reminds us of these debates in Christian contexts and suggests comparison with Aḥmad Khān’s thought:

None of these, or the like instances, are at all of the same kind, or have any characteristics in common with the idea of what is implied by the term ‘miracle,’ which is asserted to mean something at variance with nature and law; there is not the slightest analogy between an unknown or inexplicable phenomenon, and a supposed suspension of a known law: even an exceptional case of a known law is included in some larger law. Arbitrary interposition is wholly different in kind; no argument from the one can apply to the other.⁶⁴

Aḥmad Khan was similar in his stance on the agreement between the laws of nature and what divine scriptures say. He not only objected to the traditional understanding of events mentioned in the Qur’an as miracles, but also offered a detailed logical analysis based on what he perceived

⁶³ Aḥmad Khān, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, vol. 1, 129-141. Also see his series of articles on the topic of miracle in Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 78-138.

⁶⁴ Baden Powell, “On the Study of the Evidences of Christianity,” 109-110 (see chap. 2, n. 50)

as the possible causes behind these events. Other than his theological position that there can be no disagreement between the work of God and the word of God, he also raised the question regarding the very need for miracles in the contexts where his opponents believed miracles had happened. He put to critical scrutiny the prevailing ideas that miracles acted as an evidence of prophethood and that miracles added to the strength of faith in religion.⁶⁵

Another facet of Aḥmad Khān's thought that had a direct bearing on his Qur'anic scholarship was his conception of the nature of science – a conception that has continued to intrigue academic observers of modern Islam. This was related to the question of how far the discoveries that are labelled “scientific” have been established, the very issue at stake in the debates between Aḥmad Khān and his interlocutors, Muḥsin al-Mulk and Nānotwī. He wrote at the end of his *Tahrīr* two long paragraphs on this point which are important to read in the original:

It is said to us sarcastically (or tauntingly): “When Greek wisdom, astronomy and philosophy spread among Muslims, then considered in agreement with actual reality, the doctors of Islam confirmed these portions of the Qur'an which seemed in agreement with those sciences, and tried to work out corroboration of those portions (of the Qur'an) which seemed opposed to these sciences. Today when it is known that those sciences were founded on wrong first-principles, that their astronomy was absolutely opposed to reality, and when natural sciences have made more progress, you contradict those meanings which earlier doctors determined according to Greek sciences and adopt the meanings which agree with the sciences of the present day. It will be no wonder if in the future these sciences advance further and the things which today appear fully ascertained may be proven wrong. Then the need will arise of establishing other meanings of the words of the Qur'an and so on. So, the Qur'an will be a toy in the hands of people.”

We receive this taunt as glad tidings for it is our conviction that the Qur'an is in accordance with the reality of affairs. For it is the Word of God and is perfectly in agreement with the Work of God. But the great miracle in it is that at every level of our knowledge, it guides uniformly and effectively in matters for which it is sent

⁶⁵ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, “Kayā Mu'jiza Dalīl-i Nabuwwat hay?” in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1993), 92-103.

down. Its words have come down in a miraculous manner so that as the sciences continue to advance and as we ponder over it with regard to these advanced sciences, it will become known that its words are in agreement with reality in the light of these (new sciences) too, and it will be proved to us that the meanings we determined earlier, and which were proved wrong now, were a fault of our knowledge, and not of the words of the Qur'an. Hence if, in the future, sciences advance to a point where the things ascertained today are disproved, then we shall turn to the Qur'an again and will certainly find it in agreement with reality. It will become known to us that the meanings we had determined earlier were a shortcoming of our knowledge, and that the Qur'an was free of all short-comings.⁶⁶

Again, such articulations by Aḥmad Khān are often prone to multiple interpretations. For some, it meant that Aḥmad Khān wanted to keep Qur'anic meanings open forever, and thus, it could be interpreted in infinite ways.⁶⁷ But I would argue, by following the methodological lead provided by Quentin Skinner, that if we try to read these statements in the light of his overall thought on the Qur'an and its context, he did not want Qur'anic interpretations limitlessly open. First of all, reconciling scientific facts with the sayings of the Qur'an was limited to those portions of the scripture that were related to natural phenomena. It does not mean that he was doubtful on the interpretation of each and every verse of the Qur'an. Moreover, any change in the understanding of scientific laws did not mean to him that his previous understanding of the Qur'an was totally wrong. It only meant that what possible natural causes he had earlier mentioned for some of the "supernatural" looking events in the Qur'an, such as the parting of the sea in the book of Exodus in the Bible, might be explained in future in terms of other possible causes. Hence, the basic interpretation of the Qur'an that was required for guidance and broad understanding was not at risk at all due to changes in our understanding of scientific and natural laws.

⁶⁶ The English translation is from Muhammad Daud Rahbar, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān's Principles of Exegesis - II," *The Muslim World*, 46, no. 4 (1956): 330-331, doi:10.1111/j.1478-1913.1956.tb02936.x.

⁶⁷ Javed Majeed, *Muhammad Iqbal: Islam, Aesthetics, and Postcolonialism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2009), 127.

In addition to tracing the origins of Aḥmad Khān's ideas on God's acts and words, it is important to understand the nature of Muslim polemics that were occurring in colonial India. In regard to religious authority, scholars such as Nānotwī and others focused their criticism on Aḥmad Khān's fascination with Western science and its methods which, it was alleged, he treated on a par with Qur'anic verses. But the question arises: was this a debate between science and religion, or was it the old debate between reason and revelation in a new garb? The point that science could be subsumed under reason was corroborated by how Aḥmad Khān charted the history of the development of the Muslim sciences. Thus, replacing the word "science" with "reason" in the context of colonial India might have placated the storm of criticism that was hurled at him.⁶⁸ Western science in the nineteenth century could have an effect on the way Indian Muslims were reasoning on everything, including religion. For Aḥmad Khān, scientific knowledge might be fluid but the reason that analyses it is not. In short, all his efforts were squarely located in the old Muslim intellectual tradition of debate about how to strike a balance between *ma'qūlāt* and *manqūlāt* in forming opinions on religious issues.

Aḥmad Khān's Response to European Criticism of the Qur'an

The impact of European work on the Qur'an and the influence of the methods of historical criticism are seen in Aḥmad Khān's critical thinking on the Muslim tradition, the history of the Qur'an, and on such issues in *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* as *naskh*, which was one of the objects of European criticism. In the case of historical criticism, he was not following any

⁶⁸ For a basic introduction to the debate between reason and revelation as it evolved in Muslim intellectual history, see A.J. Arberry, *Reason and Revelation in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1957). Arberry highlighted the tension between different approaches or attitudes to religious knowledge and outlined the history of the intellectual struggle between what he termed "infallible authorities," who relied solely on the foundational texts, and others including theologians, philosophers, and Sufis during medieval and early modern times. Had this interaction between science and religion been seen in this light in colonial India, Aḥmad Khān would have not appeared so heretical to his contemporaries or modernist to the academic observers.

systematic method of criticism along the lines of biblical critics. What he offered was more a case of critical scrutiny of the development of Muslim intellectual resources. Aḥmad Khān's work brought to the surface anew the issue of the historicity of the Qur'an and that of other sources of the Muslim tradition. We already had some hint of this thinking in Walī Allāh's *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, but the problem was probably not felt intensely in the intellectual circles of the eighteenth century. In the post-1857 period, however, Aḥmad Khān's response in the wake of European criticism was an initial re-imagining of the history of the text of the Qur'an. In the subsequent decades, Muslim scholars consistently made their journey up the ladder as European and non-Muslim criticism regarding the Qur'an further developed, including European analysis of the history of the Qur'anic text based on manuscript evidence, as we will see in the case of Farāhī. Critiquing the methodological basis of European works, Aḥmad Khān began by dismissing foreign criticism of the Qur'an and of Islam as essentially based on unreliable sources of the tradition. He elaborated the view that the principles for a more systematic approach to research that we see now as typical of the nineteenth century were far from being present in any developed form in the early centuries of Islamic history when the Muslim sciences were in the process of taking birth. In a nutshell, his argument against European critics was that their uncritical reliance on certain Muslim sources was a flawed method for studying the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet, and Islam in general. In this regard, he briefly outlined for his European audience the problems in the Muslim intellectual tradition. First, he reminded them that the books of Ḥadīth were based on reports by different transmitters whose reliability as informers might be questioned, despite the efforts made by early ḥadīth collectors to record the biographical accounts of the tradents. The books on the biography of the Prophet were even more problematic, for they laid hardly any stress on checking the soundness of the character of a

particular channel of transmission. This already existing potential problem in these sources was aggravated by the way books of exegesis and *fiqh* were compiled. In the case of books of exegesis of the Qur'an, their compilers laid the foundations of their works on earlier traditions and later added more to these traditions in their compilations.⁶⁹ In this regard, different exegetes had different agendas to fulfill such as: pursuing a philosophical turn; increasing religiosity; and establishing a belief that God can do everything. Such trends, he argued, led to the recording of miraculous things in the exegetical literature. In short, Aḥmad Khān stressed that a) European criticism had no foundation in reliable Muslim sources and b) it was based on misunderstandings of Muslim traditional positions.

Moreover, Aḥmad Khān engaged with European criticism concerning the integrity of the Qur'an.⁷⁰ On the soundness of the process of the composition of the Qur'an, he was greatly in accord with his Muslim opponents. He rejected European criticism as either not based on reliable sources or as involving flawed understandings of what the related texts said. His final understanding of this historical process of compilation was that the Qur'an already existed towards the last days of the Prophet's life in the form in which we have it, and that the efforts during the early caliphate were merely to safeguard it from any potential hazards. In the case of variant readings (or recitations, *qir'āt*) of the text of the Qur'an, Aḥmad Khān was again in fair agreement with other Muslim scholars of his age who attributed these different readings to differences in Arabic dialects. These variant readings did not mean that there was any confusion

⁶⁹ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Musalmānoḥ kī Dīnī awr Madhhabī Kitābēn," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 11 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 360-381; Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Madhhab-i Islām kī Riwayātoḥ kī Aṣliyat awr un kī Tarwīj o Ishā'at kī Ibtidā'," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 11 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 382-464.

⁷⁰ Aḥmad Khān, "Qur'ān Janāb-i Payghambar-i Khudā par kis Ṭarḥa Nāzil hūā," 465-548.

possible in the text of the Qur'an from the very beginning. Aḥmad Khān stressed that these minor, Masoretic-type differences did not hamper the Qur'an in clearly conveying its message.

On the issue of *naskh*, Aḥmad Khān seemed fairly creative in his approach.⁷¹ Again, academic studies of Aḥmad Khān's work tend to portray him as dismissing the principle of *naskh*, a view which is ill-founded to a considerable extent. A close study of his writings brings to light a different position in his thought. He was pretty much traditional in this sense. He explained to his European readers that their understanding of the *naskh* issue in attacking the Qur'an was different from that of Muslim jurists and commentators. In his opinion, Europeans took the word *naskh* to mean that some defective verse was abrogated, and they assumed this precisely in order to challenge the integrity of the Qur'an; whereas Muslim jurists in the early centuries of Islam had used it as a specific term meant to draw legal rulings from the Qur'an and Ḥadīth. In general, he was in agreement with early Muslim jurists that an earlier Qur'anic ruling might be abrogated by a later one because of a change of circumstances. However, the earlier ruling could be invoked again if the circumstances returned to the previous stage. In short, he dismissed the European criticism for its lack of knowledge of the Muslim religious sciences. We will further consider this issue in Chapter Six in comparative analysis.

The Possibilities of Linguistic Analysis

Generally speaking, linguistic analysis is central to the act of interpreting any text, including the Qur'an, and the Muslim intellectual tradition bears witness to this fact. In India, Walī Allāh had already discussed this in detail while using the term *naẓm* to designate the "proper" meaning of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses. But historically, Aḥmad Khān's linguistic

⁷¹ Ibid. Also see Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Nāsikh o Mansūkh kī Bahath," in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 13 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1992), 139-150.

treatment of the Qur'an was the product of nearly half a century's Muslim struggle of translating the text. The most conspicuous feature of Aḥmad Khān's evolving Qur'anic hermeneutics that anticipated the debates that would ensue in later decades and persist through the twentieth century was the tendency to focus on what is to be understood literally and what figuratively in the Qur'an. This very feature can be attributed to some extent to the emergence in colonial India of a public sphere in which the Qur'an was available to a much wider audience than before, an audience which was not necessarily religious but could have literary and journalistic tendencies, like in the case of Nadhīr Aḥmad (d. 1912), who preferred the Urdu idiom of Delhi in his translation of the Qur'an.⁷² Thus, preferring a figurative meaning over the literal one could be more rational or aesthetic for poets or writers participating in literary circles than it would be for a conventionally trained religious scholar. This was manifested in the flurry of Urdu translations towards which the traditionalist response was vehemently antagonistic, as we will see in the next chapter on Thānawī.

Aḥmad Khān's linguistic treatment was also aimed at reviewing the traditional corpus of seemingly mythological ideas. That was in many respects a new, even radical, tendency for traditionalists in a world that was being influenced by scientific method. Although Aḥmad Khān's interpretive method drew upon earlier lines of exegesis of the relevant verses as well, his context was quite different. Pre-modern authors were perhaps not writing with any kind of urgency to interpret Qur'anic vocabulary in a radically different vein. By contrast, for Aḥmad Khan, who worked in the varied milieux of colonial India, the presence of apparently mythological ideas seemed to be one of the key problems that had made the Qur'an appear as a somewhat unfamiliar text to a nineteenth-century Muslim believer. Similarly, although

⁷² Nadhīr Aḥmad, *Tarjama-yi Qur'ān* (Agra: Mufid-i Ām Press, 1924). Originally published in 1895.

seemingly mythological ideas around angels, *jinn*, miracles, and Qur'anic stories could be elaborated in rational terms, such religious terms and stories had the potential to challenge an educated person in the urban settings of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century for whom science and related modes of critical thinking were beginning to appear as the touchstone of truth. In this milieu, Aḥmad Khān was among the earliest or perhaps even the first to recognize the late antique tone of Muslim scripture that, he suspected, was appearing unfamiliar to the educated people. In his struggle to break new interpretive grounds in linguistic matters, he highlighted the problem of early Muslim readers' old practices of reading the Qur'an under the influences of Jewish, Christian, and other late antique ideas. In a way, one important aspect of his Qur'an project was to serve as an invitation for a dialectical process towards a better understanding of the text. His project was an initial attempt to bring the Qur'an to the centre of discussion publicly and to free it from any human authority, yet without dismissing the Muslim intellectual tradition. In other words, his work probably paved the way to bring the Qur'an to the public sphere in British India.⁷³

The Impact of Aḥmad Khān's Qur'an Project

Aḥmad Khān did not leave any institutional framework in which his Qur'anic thought could be further developed and that could further contribute to his intellectual legacy. His *tafsīr* was never part of the curriculum taught at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College nor was there any other institutional arrangement in which the Qur'an could be investigated on the lines he suggested. In terms of his followers, Aḥmad Khān never had any intellectual following that

⁷³ Dietrich Reetz, "Religious Discourse and Contested Doctrines," in *Islam in the Public Sphere: Religious Groups in India, 1900-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 82-171. Reetz also deals with issue of widespread dissemination of the Qur'an and its commentaries. How Muslims were interacting with the Qur'an in the public sphere of British India is a separate question to explore in detail for which this study can provide only the background.

shared all the key elements of his Qur'anic thought. His close friends such as Muḥsin al-Mulk and Ḥālī, despite their respect and regard for his ideas, were not committed to his hermeneutical methods and thus did not inherit his ideas on this score for further development. However, it is precisely in this silence in terms of institutional and personal heritage that the enigma of Aḥmad Khān's considerable impact on his contemporaries and future generations lies. For, despite this apparent lack of development of any concrete intellectual lineage, his impact was seen in many corners, or was perhaps something ubiquitous. His admirers like Muḥsin al-Mulk and Ḥālī, though not always agreeing with him on matters of Qur'anic interpretation, did in essence agree with his recognition of the need to rethink what had been said before about the Qur'an or what was being interpreted for the public by traditionalists in British India. This tendency to understand the Qur'an on new lines was seen later in many sections of Muslim society, as the subsequent chapters and Chapter Six will also highlight. Many prominent, traditionally educated scholars, such as Nu'ḥmānī, shared this feeling, and by this standard, Aḥmad Khān was among the key, or perhaps the first of, scholars in this group. Moreover, in the wake of the storm of reactions to his work on the Qur'an, it might appear that he was a solitary voice in asking for thinking again on matters of Qur'anic hermeneutics. But that impression is illusory. As highlighted by Ḥālī in his biography of Aḥmad Khān, many of the traditionally educated scholars came to agree with the lines of interpretive reasoning suggested by Aḥmad Khān, as seen in a relevant issue of the journal *al-Nadwa* published by the Nadwat al-^oUlamā^o seminary.⁷⁴

In addition to the above, I would argue that it was in the very storm of criticism hurled at Aḥmad Khān's ideas that the power of his influence laid. This is suggested by his own work, by his responses to various criticisms in his *Maqālāt*, and by the larger polemical literature on

⁷⁴ Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i Jāwēd*, 353.

controversial issues pertaining to the interpretation of the Qur'an and understanding of it as the book of God. A significant number of commentaries were conceived, either partly or in full, precisely to respond to Aḥmad Khān's positions on the Qur'an. Others that tended to be overtly silent on Aḥmad Khān's positions could not help dropping a line in their introductions to the effect that their work was different from his, and that they are not naturalists or deists like him. Aḥmad Khān's own lengthy article under the title *Dāfi^c al-Buhtān* depicted to some extent how widespread perhaps was the appeal and the unease his work had produced. It is even tempting to claim that the works produced in the early twentieth century on the Qur'an, such as those by Thānawī, Farāhī, and others, were responses to his work in one way or another. Indeed, his thought even made its mark on the ways new educational institutions were conceived in colonial India. The seemingly universal desire to strike a balance between modern and traditional education, and by consequence, between different epistemes, bore the imprint of Aḥmad Khān's thought that was ultimately rooted in his understanding of the Qur'an. Therefore, I must stress that explaining Aḥmad Khān away as an apologist or as someone who conceived radical conclusions based on Qur'anic verses amounts to missing the very core of his person (as an activist), his thought, and his impact. It may be true that he contributed to the rather inchoate field of Muslim apologetics of the Qur'an,⁷⁵ but his methods of interpretation and his responses to criticism were nuanced and had varied purposes. His methods and responses were not simply apologetics, and in many instances, it is wrong even to characterize them as such. He, instead, struck the very chords of Muslims religious thinking, particularly on the occasions when others were trying to avoid key questions brought in by the modern period. Some scholars in colonial

⁷⁵ In comparison to the field of Christian apologetics, Muslim apologetics probably did not evolve as a systematic field of inquiry unless we loosely consider all Muslim answers to the criticism of Islam and the Qur'an as the sum of this field.

India, like Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938),⁷⁶ openly acknowledged his contributions, and others such as °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī (d. 1977) were implicit in their recognition of his work. Ultimately it was not his conclusions that made an impact; it was his stress on thinking about the questions emerging in the minds of modern educated Muslims in the light of older or current exegetical positions that mattered most, and he came out as perhaps the foremost representative of this movement of thinking afresh.

⁷⁶ Iqbāl wrote his famous poem “Sayyid kī Lawḥ-i Turbat,” which can be seen in his poetic anthology entitled *Bāng-i Darā*. Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Bāng-i Darā* (Hyderabad: Ghulām Muḥiyy al-Dīn Bookseller, n.d.), 43.

Chapter Four

Ashraf °Alī Thānawī (1863-1943) Imagining Exegetical Tradition in Modernity

In the Deoband tradition of Muslim scholarship in South Asia, the influence of Ashraf °Alī Thānawī¹ cannot be exaggerated, not least in the field of Qur’anic exegesis. While writing his biography, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has laid out Thānawī’s inspiring intellectual legacy in terms of the debt that his contemporary and later Deobandī scholars owe to his work, and also in terms of the continuation of the agenda of Muslim reform that Thānawī had set in his teachings and writings.² In the secular academy, Thānawī stands as a characteristic traditionalist scholar for whom the Muslim tradition mattered more than anything else, despite the intellectual challenges confronting the tradition in the modern period. He is understood as a creative scholar who guided the Muslim community in colonial India in the religious sphere, but who sourced his creativity from within the tradition. He is often portrayed as a daring scholar who neither wanted to succumb to the rising tide of European ideas nor desired to read the foundational texts of Islam without the aid of traditional, pre-modern opinions. He can also be seen in the vein in which Barbara Metcalf characterizes the reformist and scholarly orientation of the Deoband madrasa after the trauma of the Mutiny:

The °ulama now tended, by and large, to leave their beloved but desolate Delhi behind in favor of the qasbahs in which many of them had their roots. The places they chose, such as Deoband, Saharanpur, Kandhlah, Gangoh, and Bareilly, were less touched by the British presence and were, increasingly, the centres for preserving Muslim cultural and religious life. In this work of preservation, the °ulama were heirs to the early nineteenth-century program of reform: its self-consciousness about religion, its repertoire of techniques of influence, and the inspiration of its

¹ Other spellings of his name that are found in the academic discourse on include Thānawī, Thānvī, and Thānwī apart from phonetically inclined usage such as Thanawi.

² Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf °Ali Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 121-126.

charismatic leaders. On that foundation, they turned their attention to the establishment of educational institutions and the training of men to teach and guide Muslims of all backgrounds and classes of society.³

For new researchers on traditionalist Islam in British India, the figure of Thānawī is not only inescapable but also one of the most alluring, due to the breadth and depth of his writings. This richness has resulted in many new works being centred on his career and thought. A somewhat recent analysis of his instrumental legal rulings has shown how Thānawī creatively developed his new opinion on women's right to divorce by drawing upon Malikī *fiqh* and other conceptual frameworks borrowed from the Muslim tradition.⁴ Another study has investigated how Thānawī's engagement in intra-Sunni debates over theological issues led to the emergence of new political theologies in colonial India.⁵ Similarly, recent research has examined Thānawī's claim to be a custodian of "orthodox" Islam and argued how he successfully staged this claim in the colonial Indian context. It has shown the different sociological and hermeneutical strategies by which he was able to lead orthodox Islam to survive the encounter with modernity.⁶

Thānawī's Intellectual Formation and Works

An initial broad look at his career is important to contextualize his work and to provide historical background of his Qur'anic scholarship in the later sections of this chapter. Thānawī was born in the North Indian *qaṣba* of Thāna Bhawan in 1863.⁷ Such smaller *qaṣbas*, though

³ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 85-86.

⁴ Fareeha Khan, "Traditionalist Approaches to Sharī'a Reform: Mawlana Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī's Fatwa on Women's Right to Divorce" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008).

⁵ Tareen, "Limits of Tradition." Also see William Kesler Jackson, "A Subcontinent's Sunni Schism: The Deobandi-Barelvi Rivalry and the Creation of Modern South Asia" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2013).

⁶ Ali Altaf Mian, "Surviving Modernity: Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī (1863-1943) and the Making of Muslim Orthodoxy in Colonial India" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2015).

⁷ The concept of *qaṣba*, as a middle space between village and urban centre, is important in order to understand the milieu in which Muslim religious scholars grew up as scholars. During British Empire, Thāna Bhawan was part of the nexus of neighbouring *qaṣbas* of the United Provinces, which was the breeding ground of the '*ulamā*'. The other such *qaṣbas* included the small towns of Gangoh, Kayrāna, Jhanjhāna, Kāndihla, Amroha, Ambēṭha, and Rā'ēpūr. In the aftermath of the event of 1857, there was a feeling among the '*ulamā*' of these *qaṣbas* that is

situated away from larger urban centres, had a reputation for producing religious scholars and saints. These towns had become centres of Muslim culture through long processes that often had started with land grants by Mughal emperors and other rulers. There were particular traditions of learning attributed to these town. Some towns were renowned for their stress on *ma^cqūlāt* and others had made their name in *manqūlāt*. Moreover, these towns also featured religious milieux that had emerged around Sufi shrines. Thānawī's own *qaṣba* was home to a famous Sufi *khānqāh* ('hospice'), whose famous Sufi master before Thānawī was Imdād Allāh, with whom the exegete developed a special master-disciple relationship.

As a youth, Thānawī left his hometown and underwent three formative experiences before returning home to establish the Sufi hospice. He studied first at the famous Deoband seminary⁸ from 1878 to 1883, then taught for some fourteen years (from 1883-1897) at the seminary, *Jāmi^c al-^cUlūm*, in the city of Kanpur in the United Provinces, and in the meantime he developed a master-disciple relationship, around 1881, with the well-known Sufi of the Chishtī order, Imdād Allāh.⁹ Moreover, the deep-rooted inspiration he drew from the founders of the Deoband madrasa, Nānotwī and Gangohī, made a lasting impact on his thought, not least when he came into dispute with the school of Barēlwīs, led by Raḍā Khān, over theological issues.

understood by Christopher Bayly as a fear "for the fate of their class and culture." Cited in Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 91. See also Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, 189-93, 366-8. Bayly called these places "the repository of aristocratic and courtly values" in North India (ibid., 348). A recent work that investigates the issue from the perspective of sociological history is Rahman, *Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India*. Rahman highlights the contributions of these *qaṣbas* to the intellectual life of Muslims in British India (see Introduction, n. 41).

⁸ For a detailed introduction to this madrasa and the Muslim reform movement it initiated, see Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*. The work that claimed to update Metcalf's book is Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*.

⁹ Apart from his Sufi influence on the Deoband tradition and his appropriation by other religious schools in British India, Imdād Allāh's *Fayṣala-yi Haft Mas'ala* seemed to be a well-known contribution to the theological debates of the time, an attempt at reconciling sectarian polemics among Deobandī and Barēlwī schools of thought.

Thānawī had a younger brother too, and his father envisioned two different educational careers for the two of them. For Thānawī, he chose the path of the traditional Islamic sciences and for the younger one, education in English-oriented disciplines. On one occasion, as Thānawī's biographer noted, his father predicted a flourishing career for Thānawī despite the rising tide of English education. Thānawī's studies began with learning recitation of the Qur'an at an early age, along with learning Persian in the North Indian town of Meerut, where his father managed the estate of an Indian notable. He had started learning Arabic before going at the age of fifteen to study at the Dār al-^oUlūm of Deoband, where he underwent the traditional madrasa curriculum focused on Ḥadīth, *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, and other Islamic disciplines. Of all these disciplines for honing a student's skills in the traditional Islamic sciences, most stress at Deoband seemed to be laid on the study of Ḥadīth. Thānawī studied this discipline under the famous scholar, Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan (d. 1920), who himself was an author of a Qur'an translation and partial commentary. Zaman hints at the different approaches to studying Ḥadīth prevalent at Deoband during those times.¹⁰ In teachers like al-Ḥasan, there was a less strong tendency than others towards moulding different ḥadīth sayings according to the dictates of Ḥanafī law, the school of Islamic law that Deoband subscribed to. By contrast, other instructors were seen as teaching how to harmonize prophetic sayings with what their preferred law said on a certain issue. In short, what Thānawī's biographers illustrate is a world of multiple ideas within madrasa educational systems that honed Thānawī's academic skills to deal with issues of interpretation in a creative manner. At the age of twenty, he graduated from Deoband and was prepared for his own career in madrasa teaching.

¹⁰ Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi*, 15-17.

Subsequent to his teaching career at Kanpur, Thānawī made his permanent abode in his hometown Thāna Bhawan where he returned to lead the same Sufi lodge that was once the seat of his Sufi master, Imdād Allāh. At this Sufi lodge he carried multiple identities: as a jurist, a Sufi master, and also as the patron of the Deoband seminary.¹¹ As Zaman aptly notes, he was influencing and influenced by many overlapping communities.¹² Thānawī's interaction with these communities informed his thought and practice in many ways. Here I am especially interested in outlining how these communities and their underlying identities were important for his work, including his Qur'anic scholarship. Thānawī's relationship with Deobandī community is central to my analysis of his work on the Qur'an, particularly when the school is understood as the custodian of the transmitted Muslim sciences (*manqūlāt*) in contrast to the rational disciplines. Scrutinizing Thānawī's other identity as a Sufi helps us distinguish him from competing schools of Sufi orientations such as the Barēlwīs and appreciate his mystical approach to the Qur'an. In addition, his engagements with the Muslim community at large, which became the focus of his reformist activities and writings, including his *tafsīr*, were highly instrumental in developing his religious thought. Finally, his relationship with the evolving Muslim political community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was decisive for the particular emphasis in his writings on the development of Muslim identity. In addition to the above communities that Zaman identified, there were other collectivities and intellectual clusters, whose thought and activities had a clear bearing on Thānawī's Qur'anic thought. These included: Christian missionaries, particularly those with whom he carried on disputations;¹³ the

¹¹ His biographer, in a eulogizing and hagiographical tone, betrays many several of his person as viewed by his contemporaries and followers. He introduced Thānawī as *ḥakīm al-umma* ("sage of the community"); *mujaddid al-milla* ("renewer of the nation"); *muḥiyy al-sunna* ("revivor of the Prophet's path"); *quṭb al-irshād* ("pillar of guidance"); *imam al-ṭarīq* ("leader of the Sufi path"); *ḥanafī*; *chishtī*; *ṣābrī*; and *imdādī*. AS, vol. 1, 28.

¹² Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi*, 31-34.

¹³ AS, vol. 1, 63-64, 140-41, 207.

various contemporary Muslim intellectual and religious schools of thought with whom he continuously debated like the so-called “outlawed” Aḥmadiyya community;¹⁴ the larger body of Europeans and their works on the Qur’an and *Sīra*, works with which many others among his contemporaries were engaging.

The above points allow us to contrast Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī, for each had a different intellectual trajectory. While the former had lived the pre-Mutiny era, the latter came of age at a time when the Muslim scholars of North India had already adjusted themselves to some extent to new circumstances of British dominance, for instance, in terms of new educational institutions. By the time Thānawī was set to join an educational institution, the Dār al-‘Ulūm at Deoband was already well established with its evolving intellectual heritage and influence in contrast to the Aligarh school. Already Nānotwī had set the precedent of debating with the so-called *nēcharīs*. Whereas Aḥmad Khān was of necessity the architect of a new vision, Thānawī looked to strengthen an already established platform that proclaimed itself as the “rightful custodian of the Muslim tradition.”

The range of Thānawī’s work spans almost all the scholarly disciplines of the Muslim religious tradition. So much as a brief glance at the list of his writings compiled by his biographer, ‘Azīz al-Ḥasan in his *Ashraf al-Sawāniḥ*, can give the reader an idea of his intellectual output.¹⁵ The most conspicuous items in his oeuvre are his twelve-volume Qur’an commentary, multivolume *fatāwā* (‘legal verdicts’), *malfūzāt* (‘utterances’) collections, and the

¹⁴ AS, vol. 1, 142-143.

¹⁵ ‘Azīz al-Ḥasan, *Ashraf al-Sawāniḥ*, 4 vols. (Multan: Idāra-yi Tā’lifāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2006) (cited in the footnotes as AS). Endorsing al-Ḥasan’s work, which was originally published in 1935 from Thāna Bḥawan, Thānawī himself wrote a foreword to the biography. Al-Ḥasan’s work, on many occasions, reveals elements of hagiographical writing. Despite this fact, his biography is still a very important resource to understand the life and times of Thānawī.

anthologies of his sermons (*mawāʿiẓ*) and speeches (*khutbāt*). In this chapter, the primary focus is on assessing Thānawī's contributions to the Qur'anic scholarship of his time. These contributions can be studied by investigating his *tafsīr* and other writings, including many of his short essays (*rasāʾil*), in which he is seen debating with his contemporaries on issues related to the interpretation of the Qur'an. These short essays have rarely been studied; some of them remain in manuscript form.

Thānawī's Works on the Qur'an

Despite the contrasts between the two men, Thānawī was like Aḥmad Khān in that both vigorously engaged in scholarly activism around the interpretation of the Qur'an and launched their respective Qur'anic projects. In terms of its beginnings, Thānawī's project was predicated on the need to write a new translation and commentary of the Qur'an in the framework of an emerging public sphere in which the Qur'an was easily accessible to educated people. Moreover, Aḥmad Khān's ideas about how to interpret the Qur'an were very much in the air of colonial India when Thānawī chose to write his commentary. Thus, Thānawī felt himself compelled to write something for the larger public for whom the idea that traditional sources of Qur'anic exegesis could offer convincing answers to new questions was being challenged. Underlying the above two factors was Thānawī's Deobandī orientation towards Muslim reform. It was his desire to have his intellectual world imbued with a distinctly Deobandī colouring, instead of seeking to construct it as primarily a product of engagement with Anglo-Oriental ideas. His Qur'an commentary was rooted in his strong commitment to explain the meaning of the Qur'anic text based on the traditional and authentic understanding as transmitted by generations of Sunni scholars. He seemed to have a firm conviction that he was simply elaborating in more detail Qur'anic meanings which were fixed already and that his interpretations were strictly in line

with the larger Muslim tradition. The agenda of his Qur'an project was also clear to a great extent. It was to build an exegetical project that could blend pre-modern exegetical ideas, mystical interpretation, and necessary exegetical amplifications. In terms of its impact, his project was greatly successful in leaving a strong exegetical legacy in terms of the sustained appeal of his own work and especially its influence on other Deobandī commentaries. As his *fatāwā* collections show on occasions, his commentary was perceived by many of its readers, who subscribed to Deobandī religious orientation, as authentic due to its reliance on generations of Muslim exegetes, and not simply on Thānawī's own whims and subjectivity.

Developing a comprehensive bibliography of Thānawī's works on the Qur'an is beyond the scope of this chapter for that would demand a larger engagement with his entire oeuvre including *fatāwā*, *khuṭbāt*, and *malfūzāt*. However, in the course of this chapter, the reader will become acquainted with many of his key writings that are significant in understanding his Qur'anic project. For simplicity's sake, one can broadly categorize his works according to the list compiled by Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī in his introduction to the anthology of Thānawī's miscellaneous discourses of Qur'anic interpretation, *Ashraf al-Tafāsīr*.¹⁶ A brief look at these varied works helps us understand the nature of the scholarly task that Thānawī set for himself. Other than his magnum opus, his commentary *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān*, which I will discuss in detail below, his works dealing with various aspects of the Qur'an can be divided into four categories: 1) Works that deal with recitation of the Qur'an, its blessings, and the spiritual qualities that the scripture embodies; 2) works that deal with technical issues such as variant readings of the Qur'an; 3) works that manifest Thānawī's reformist spirit, particularly his debates with contemporaries on the interpretation of the Qur'an, and also his private teaching

¹⁶ Muḥammad Iqbāl Qurayshī, ed., *Ashraf al-Tafāsīr*, 4 vols. (Multan: Idāra-yi Tā'lifāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2009).

sessions with women on *tafsīr*; and 4) works that deal with various controversial issues related to the interpretation of the Qur'an that dealt with the theological, legal, and methodological concerns of his times.

Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān: Thānawī's Principles of Interpretation

Other than Thānawī's *fatāwā*, *khuṭbāt*, and *mawā'iz* collections, the work that has enabled his legacy to dominate the Deoband tradition of religious scholarship is his monumental commentary on the Qur'an, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān*.¹⁷ The original version, which was first printed in twelve volumes in 1908, was revised later in 1934. Its recent editions are now printed in three oversized volumes. The printed editions of the *tafsīr* routinely contain Thānawī's two other writings related to the understanding of the Qur'an: 1) an Urdu translation of his Arabic essay, *Masā'il al-Sulūk min Kalām Malik al-Mulūk*,¹⁸ which endeavours to establish certain key features of the Sufi path through the Qur'an and guides the reader on how the scripture can help a traveller on this path;¹⁹ and 2) *Wujūh al-Mathānī*, in Arabic, which deals with seven canonical readings of the Qur'an.

In addition to showing Thānawī's skills as a textualist, studying his *tafsīr* and his larger Qur'anic scholarship provides a way to learn about his development as an intellectual as well as

¹⁷ I have used the following modern edition of the text: Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān ma' Urdū Tarjama Masā'il al-Sulūk wa ma' Arabī Wujūh al-Mathānī ma' Tawjīh al-Kalimāt wa al-Ma'ānī*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Maktaba Raḥmāniyya, 2011) (cited in the footnotes as *TBQ*). Two works that have earlier studied Thānawī's *tafsīr* provide us a broad overview of his commentary. See Riḥāna Ḍiyā° Şiddīqī, *Mawlānā Ashraf °Alī Thānawī kī Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān kā Taḥqīqī wa Tanqīdī Muṭāli'a* (Aligarh: Published privately by the author, 1991); Sayyid Muḥammad °Abd al-Qādir Āzād, "Mawlānā Ashraf °Alī Thānawī Baḥaythiyat-i Mufasssīr-i Qur'ān" (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 1992).

¹⁸ The original edition and the later editions such as the one published in 1955 have also included the Arabic text of *Masā'il al-Sulūk* along side its Urdu translation.

¹⁹ For Thānawī's another work dealing with the derivation of Sufi principles from the Qur'an, see Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Tā'id al-Ḥaqīqa bi-l-Āyāt al-Atīqa," in *Al-Takashshuf °an Muhimmāt al-Taşawwuf* (Delhi: Kutub Khāna Ashrafiyya, n.d.), 479-506.

about the world that shaped and was shaped by him. As briefly mentioned above, Thānawī's motivation to write a new commentary of the Qur'an stemmed from his observation of what he saw as "inauthentic" translations²⁰ that were emerging due to the spread of the technology of print.²¹ He considered the commentaries and translations written by the family of Walī Allāh as sufficient for the guidance of the masses. However, the old Urdu idiom in which these works had been written in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made it imperative for him to write a simpler translation as well as an exegesis.

The introductory sections of his *tafsīr* give us a glimpse of the hermeneutical principles that Thānawī claimed had guided his work. There are four broad categories into which we can divide these different hermeneutical principles or guidelines. First, he envisaged interpreting the Qur'an within the tradition of the pre-modern *tafsīr*. This is an orientation captured most visibly in his pronouncements of an effective Qur'anic hermeneutics. He enlisted a long list of classical works of Qur'an commentary that he made use of while explaining Qur'anic verses. The list gives an impression of his broad engagement with the whole Sunni exegetical tradition, but expresses no particular preference.²² However, we will be better acquainted with which classical sources he used most once we start reading his praxis of interpretation. His engagement with the classical sources can particularly be seen in the Arabic portion of his exegesis which he wrote

²⁰ He criticized Nadhīr Aḥmad, an associate of Aḥmad Khān, for his translation of the Qur'an as I will discuss below in this chapter. See Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Islāh-i Tarjama-yi Dihlawiyya* (Sādūrāh: Maṭba° Bilālī, n.d.).

²¹ As discussed in Chapter Two, Ulrike Stark's work gives the historical overview of the spread of Urdu religious literature in colonial India. Stark, *Empire of Books* (see chap. 2, n. 59). A related forthcoming work is Ulrike Stark, "A Qur'an for Every Household: Mass Printing and the Commercialization of Islamic Sacred Texts in Nineteenth-Century Lucknow," in *Sacred Texts and Print Culture: The Case of the Qur'an and the Bible of the Eastern Churches, 18th and 19th Centuries*, eds. Nadia al-Baghdadi and Mushirul Hasan (Budapest: Central European University Press, forthcoming).

²² He mentions the *tafāsīr* of the following authors, which he consulted for his commentary: Al-Baghawī (d. 1122); al-Nasafī (d. 1142); al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286); al-Khāzin (d. 1324); Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373); Ibn °Ādil (d. 1475); al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505); and al-Ālūsī (d. 1854).

for the specialists. Some of the famous Indian works of exegesis he mentioned were: *Tabṣīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān* by °Alī bin Aḥmad al-Mahā°imī (d. 1431) which was discussed in Chapter One; and *Tafsīr Faḥ al-Mannān* (commonly known as *Tafsīr-i Ḥaqqānī*) by °Abd al-Ḥaqq Ḥaqqānī (d. 1916), a Sunni scholar famous for his disputations with non-Muslims in colonial India. In addition, Thānawī also mentioned some books of Ḥadīth and *Sīra* that he consulted for writing his commentary. In writing the Arabic portion of his exegesis, he mostly used pre-modern exegetical resources that served as the foundations of his interpretation upon which he weaved his Urdu commentary for his contemporary audience. His Arabic exegesis contained the following captions under which he discussed the complexities of a verse or a Qur’anic passage: *al-Riwāyāt* (“Traditions”); *al-Lughāt* (“Linguistic Issues”); *al-Balāgha* (“Rhetoric”); and *al-Kalām* (“Theology”). Thānawī further explained that in the cases where there was seen a disagreement of interpretation among pre-modern exegetes, he chose the Ḥanafī *madhhab* (“path/school”) as his criterion and preferred opinion. But, in his actual practice of writing commentary, this preference only applied to the verses dealing with issues of Islamic law.²³ Moreover, he claimed to rely on authentic ḥadīths only, but on occasions, where no trustworthy prophetic tradition was available, he used a less authentic tradition, though only if the Qur’anic verse in question allowed the application of the weak prophetic tradition on semantic or contextual grounds. He asserted, in general, that he preferred the earliest exegetical traditions over later ones, a characteristic usually ascribed to modernists and not traditionalists.

Second, Thānawī explained the text of the Qur’an by highlighting *rabṭ* (“connection”) or *rabṭ bayna al-āyāt* (the “inter-connectedness of verses”). He emphasized discovering *rabṭ*

²³ Thānawī on many occasions cited the well-known Ḥanafī law manual of Muḥammad Amīn ibn °Ābidīn (d. 1836) entitled *Radd al-Muḥtār °alā Al-Durr al-Mukhtār*, that is, marginalia on *Al-Durr al-Mukhtār Sharḥ Tanwīr al-Abṣār wa-Jāmi° al-Biḥār* by Ibn al-Raḥmān al-Ḥaṣkafī (d. 1088).

between consecutive verses, or between different sections of a sura. In reading a certain set of verses as a unified passage, Thānawī took into consideration the following elements in the passage that can help make it seem continuous: *ittiḥād* (“unity / singleness”); *taqārub* (“affinity / convergence”); and *tanāsub* (“proportionality / harmony / symmetry”). However, he did not discuss these three aspects in any detail - neither in the light of pre-modern theories of Arabic rhetoric (*balāgha*) nor within the confines of any theory of Qur’anic coherence (*naẓm*). We can better grasp his understanding of *rabṭ* and his techniques to discover the connections between verses only through studying his art of interpretation in detail. This can show us how the above three elements make sense in combination. Moreover, in Thānawī, *rabṭ* or *naẓm* was less a principle that he followed to explain a whole sura and more a feature of the Qur’an that he wanted to unfold in order to highlight the beauty of the scripture and thus, enable an ordinary reader to be at ease with reading the text. It was in Farāhī, as we will see in the next chapter, that *naẓm* acquired the shape of a meta-principle, beyond merely a feature of the Qur’an. The fascination with *rabṭ*, as we discussed in Chapter Two, was an established feature of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentaries in British India. In addition to his *tafsīr*, Thānawī also wrote a separate Arabic book, *Sabq al-Ghāyāt fī Nasaq al-Āyāt*,²⁴ for explaining his view of the arrangement of Qur’anic verses.

The third category of Thānawī’s hermeneutical principles was reflected in his perception of the Qur’an as a text that required specialists to explain it to the common man.²⁵ Debates on the meanings of Qur’anic vocabulary and verses raised some specific interpretive challenges that contemporary scholars and their audiences were facing. Thānawī identified three challenges that

²⁴ This essay has been separately published in *Ashraf al-Tafsīr*. See n. 16 above.

²⁵ This feature permeates throughout his other three interpretive approaches. It is depicted in the form of his exegetical amplifications.

an ordinary reader might be faced with.²⁶ In his opinion, these three challenging scenarios for the reader could be reflected in: 1) Qur’anic passages where translation does not help, and the text needs further explanation; 2) passages where the Qur’an raises doubts in the minds of the reader pertaining to theological, moral, or legal issues; and 3) passages where the Qur’anic “apparent” meaning is contrary to some famous or well-established idea or practice in the Muslim tradition. In the mind of Thānawī, these three possible scenarios highlighted the challenge that a modern interpreter, like him, confronted from the very beginning in modern settings, and for this reason he developed certain interpretive strategies to facilitate the reading of the Qur’an for his contemporary readers. Thānawī’s proclaimed objective was to offer a simplified explanation for the general public of what the Qur’an meant on different occasions. Therefore, he restricted his detailed discussions related to *fiqh* (“jurisprudence”) and *kalām* (“theology”) to only those verses which clearly brought to the fore any issues of public importance in his times.

The final category of Thānawī’s hermeneutical principles deals with the challenge of harmonizing seemingly contradictory elements in the foundational texts of Islam. His focus here was on interpretive challenges which stemmed from apparent discrepancies between the Qur’an, Ḥadīth, and established facts based on reason and the senses (*amr thābit bi-l-‘aql wa al-ḥiss*).²⁷ He aimed at establishing an authentic method to interpret the Qur’an, for example, in the event a verse appeared to be contradicted by another verse or a ḥadīth. What Thānawī wanted to condemn were methods based on either speculative reasoning or inauthentic evidence (*dalīl ghayr ṣaḥīḥ*) in such challenging cases of interpretation— likely alluding to scholars of Aḥmad

²⁶ For meeting these challenges, Thānawī offered his exegetical amplifications on the Qur’anic text for the reader by using the Arabic letter/particle *fa* (فـ) as an in-text caption to begin his elaboration of a verse or a passage.

²⁷ This principle may actually be seen as an additional enunciation of his second principle of interpreting the Qur’an based on the pre-modern exegetical tradition.

Khān's orientation. It was Thānawī's contemporary Muslim scholarship that he was tacitly targeting while coping with these exegetical challenges.

Experiencing Thānawī's *Tafsīr*

Sūrat al-Baqara: Q 2:1-4

In order to have a first-hand glimpse and idea of Thānawī's *tafsīr* in Urdu and Arabic, let us read the exegesis he gives of his first selected passage of Q 2. The commentary on the passage embodies to a considerable extent the hermeneutical techniques employed by the exegete. Here I translate, with my footnotes, the relevant portion of *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān*:

English Translation of Q 2:1-4:

1 Alif Lam Mim, 2 This is a Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, 3 who believe in the unseen, are resolute in prayer, and give [to others] out of what We have provided for them; 4 those who believe in the revelation sent down to you [Muhammad], and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the Hereafter.

Tafsīr begins:²⁸

Tafsīr: Sūrat al-Baqara: The *rabṭ* between this sura and Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1) is that in the latter, guidance had been requested and here this sura embodies the acceptance given [by God] to this request [by highlighting the fact] that this is the book of guidance - hence [you should] follow the book.

alif-lām-mīm: **fa**²⁹: The meanings of these letters were not told to ordinary people. Perhaps³⁰ the Prophet might have been informed [but he did not tell his people]

²⁸ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 22-24.

²⁹ Thānawī's normal method of writing comments on the Qur'anic verses is to first mention the verse or part of it in Arabic and then write its translation in Urdu. Afterwards, he uses the Arabic particle 'fa' to add his gloss. See n. 26 above for the explanation of this caption.

³⁰ Thānawī here uses marginalia (*al-ḥawāshī*) to explain this further. Here in this and other footnotes, an English translation is given for his section entitled *al-Ḥawāshī*. I use the symbol "h¹" etc. in superscript to show Thānawī's use of marginalia. Sometimes, I further add my comments in the square brackets in the end. Translation of Thānawī's *Ḥāshiyā* begins: h¹: "The word *shāyad* ("perhaps") is added here because we have many different sayings from the 'ulamā' [on this]. About the doubt [or question] that if the Prophet was not given a certain knowledge of *alif-lām-mīm*, then what is the benefit of this part to be revealed, my answer would be that the absence of a particular advantage (*khāṣ naf'*) does not make the absence of absolute benefit (*muṭlaq naf'*) impossible. There is still a possibility that other than teaching the Prophet it may have some other merit to it. If that advantage is unknown to us, it does not mean that this advantage does not exist."

because Allāh and the Prophet have told only those things [to people] whose lack of knowledge can cause some problem in religious matters, and [thus] not knowing them [that is *alif-lām-mīm*] posed no problem. That is why we need not to be inquisitive about such matters.³¹

Dhālik al-kitābu lā rayba fih: **fa**: that means, the exalted Qur'an is a book about which there is no doubt that it comes from Allāh. That means that this [fact] is established beyond doubt³² even if someone, less sensible, is uncertain about it; for anything true in reality remains true despite anybody doubting it.

Ṣifāt-i mu'minīn ("believers' attributes"):³³ *ḥudan li-l-muttaqīn*. This [book] guides the way for those who³⁴ fear God: **fa**: because the one who does not fear God does not appreciate the path of the Qur'an that guides towards Him.³⁵ *alladhīna yu'minūna bi-l-ghayb*: The people who fear God are those who believe in things hidden'.^{36h5} **fa**: (the meaning of *ghayb*): meaning, they believe in those things that are hidden from their senses, simply because Allāh and the Prophet say so.

wa yuqīmūna al-ṣalāt: And they establish their ritual prayers: **fa**: the meaning of establishing prayer is to say ritual prayers with punctuality; and they fulfill all of

³¹ Translation of Ṭhānawī's *Ḥāshiyā*:h²: "The purpose of this is to state the reason for not writing any meaning of *ḥurūf-i muqatta'āt* because the *'ulamā'* differ as to whether *muqatta'āt* are part of *mutashābihāt* ("allegorical verses") or not. And it is said that the difference of opinion in its being *mutashābih* is, in fact, both linguistic and real, because those people who deny the [possibility] of knowledge [of these terms], differ in terms of *tafsīr*, that is, in what it means (*ta'in-i murād*); [whereas] those who accept the possibility of knowledge, they do that in terms of *tā'wīl*, that is, in terms of its possible meaning (*ihtimāl-i murād*). Thus, those who deny [to a certain extent], others do not [try] to agree [with them] to that extent; and those who corroborate [to an extent], others do not try to negate to that extent³¹." [My comment: In general, Ṭhānawī attempts to reconcile different schools of thought in the Muslim tradition.]

³² Translation of Ṭhānawī's *Ḥāshiyā*: h³: [Translated from the Arabic text of Ṭhānawī's *tafsīr*] "meaning, the end result is *al-tayaqqun* ("conviction") which is an attribute [of a believer]; it does not matter if someone [other than the believer] doubts or does not lend himself to doubt; [in either case], it does not make this matter less certain in reality [for the believer]."

³³ Here the exegete gives a caption in Urdu in order to facilitate understanding of the reader – a feature that apparently gives stability to the text for an ordinary reader.

³⁴ Translation of Ṭhānawī's *Ḥāshiyā*: h⁴: "Here the literal meaning of *taqwā* is taken; thus, it makes the well-known objection redundant [see my comment at the end of this note], * nor is there a need to offer apologetic answers. And it is also possible that *taqwā* is understood in a technical sense but [then it would mean nothing] save what the *al-mutakallim* ("the speaker") intends; then the meaning would be that those who are *muttaqī* at the time of this revelation (*al-takallum*) acquired this *taqwā* because of this *kalām*. Therefore, there is no figurative element in the word *muttaqī* [see my comment below] ***". [My comments: *Here Ṭhānawī alludes to the theological issues related to the terminological use of the term *taqwā* in the history of Islamic thought. One can find representative debates in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 22-24; [My comments: **Here Ṭhānawī draws upon Arabic rhetoric to elucidate the meaning of *taqwā*.]

³⁵ Ṭhānawī here answers a question that he anticipates from the reader.

³⁶ Translation of Ṭhānawī's *Ḥāshiyā*: h⁵: "That is, *ghayb* means *mā ghāba 'annā* ("what is hidden from us"), and not the terminological meaning. In the terminological sense*, *ghayb* means something that is not based on any evidence or argument, and obviously *īmān* is something that is based on some reason [or evidence]. [My comment*: Here the terminological sense means theological (*kalāmī*) sense.]

[prayers'] conditions and *arkān* ("individual steps/elements") involved. *wa mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn* and they spend from whatever We have given them: **fa:** meaning, spending on things considered pious [or philanthropic].

Wa alladhīna yu'minūna bi-mā unzila ilayka wa mā unzila min qablik: And these people are those who believe in the book revealed on them and also believe in the books revealed before them: **fa:** (the meaning of believing in older books) This means that they believe in the Qur'an and also in earlier books such as the *tawrāt* ("Torah") and the *injīl* ("Gospels").

Mas'ala ("a related issue"):³⁷ *īmān* ("faith") means believing something is true; [practically] doing [something] is another matter. Therefore, believing in all the books revealed to the prophets as true is a pre-condition of *īmān*, meaning these books were true as and when revealed by the Almighty. The extent to which selfish people tampered with the Bible [points to the fact] that it was a wrong [that they committed]. As far as the practical observance [in Islamic matters] is concerned, that will be based on the Qur'an [only]; all the earlier books are now abrogated, and it is not legitimate to act according to them. *wa bi-l-ākhirati hum yuqinūn*, meaning, they believe in the Hereafter as well.

Translation from the Sufi text, *Masā'il al-Sulūk*: In the verse *mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn* above, the general tone (*umūm*) of the verse implies that they pour forth gnostic lights (*anwār-i ma'rifat*), which Allāh have bestowed on them, on those who seek this enlightenment. Regarding *wa alladhīna yu'minūna bi-mā unzila ilayka wa mā unzila min qablika*, we can make the analogy (*qiyās*) that although we should have a belief in all the Sufi masters (*shayūkh*), we should follow only our own *shaykh*, that is, similar to what we believe in the case of prophets [in general].

Arabic Portion of *Thānawī's Tafsi'r*³⁸

Mulhiqāt al-Tarjama ("Supplements to the Urdu Translation"):
[About *al-taqwā*] I would say that *al-taqwā* is, in fact, based on its real meaning, and the end result of it is fear, which exists before *īmān* and [this fear] leads or directs one towards *īmān* and this establishes the *tafsi'r* of *al-taqwā*. [This is achieved by] mentioning it in opposition to being free from any worry (because) God says [so in the Qur'an]: "as regards the one who does charity and fears" (Q 92:5); thus, the outcome of *al-taqwā* is concern and worry, and the consequence of being carefree is absence of worry. This is what I understand, and all the praise is for Allāh, the Bestower, the Giver.

Al-Riwāyāt ("Traditions")³⁹

³⁷ In this section, *Thānawī* usually raises a theological or legal issue hinted at in the related verses.

³⁸ As explained above, *Thānawī* wrote this section specifically for the specialists and madrasa teachers who could explain the technical issues of *tafsi'r* to their students.

³⁹ The section includes exegetical traditions and *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

Sūrat al-Baqara is Medinan, as reported in *Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Maʿānī* of al-Ālūsī;⁴⁰ In *Lubāb al-Nuqūl*,⁴¹ al-Farayābī and Ibn Jarīr narrate on the authority of Mujāhid - he says that the four verses in the beginning of Sūrat al-Baqara were revealed about *muʾminūn* (“believers”), two about *kāfirūn* (“disbelievers”), and thirteen about *munāfiqūn* (“hypocrites”). About Allāh’s words, *alif-lām-mīm*, al-Baghawī⁴² said on the authority of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, may Allāh be pleased with him: every book has a secret; the secret of Allāh’s Qur’an is the beginning of the suras. And ʿAlī, may Allāh be pleased with him, said: Every book has a best part and the best part of this book is the spelling letters (*al-ḥurūf al-tahajjīʿ*). This has been reported by al-Thaʿalabī on the authority of Abū Bakr and ʿAlī and many others; and al-Samarqandī reported on the authority of ʿUmar and ʿUthmān and Ibn Masʿūd (mentioned by *Tafsīr-i Maḏharī* of Thanāʾ Allāh Pānipatī). Ibn ʿAbbās says: *lā rayba fīh* means there is no doubt about it; *li-l-muttaqīn* means “for the believers” who fear pronouncing partners with Allāh (*al-shirk*) and they act according to His injunctions, believing in them and corroborating them. *yuqīmūna al-ṣalāt* means fulfilment of (prayer’s elements of) *al-rukūʿ*, *al-sujūd*, recitation, [along with] submissiveness (*al-khashūʿ fihā*) and devotion (*al-iqbāl ʿalayhā*) in it. [Thānawī cites that this is from al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Itqān*.]

Al-Lughāt (“lexical / linguistic issues”)

Al-rayb originates from *rāba*, meaning, when you are in doubt. The essence of doubt is anxiety (*qalaq*) and uneasiness (*iḏṭirāb*) of the self; [as soon as] you utter a lie, [you feel] doubt because it disturbs your [inner] self and does not give you peace or stability. You are in the greatest of doubts, meaning anxiety, if you are a truthful person and suffering from something that is not giving you peace and satisfaction. Whatever gives you [such an] anxiety and wounds the heart belongs to the misfortunes caused by this doubt. From al-Zamakhsharī’s *Al-Kashshāf*.

Al-muttaqī is the [grammatical] subject (*ism fāʿil*), as derived from the Arabic usage, which is manifested in [the phrase] *waqāhu fātaqā* (“he saved him, and he became cautious”). *Al-wiqāya* is the apex of protection or guarding, and it stems from fear and it is used in this sense; for example, Allāh says: *illā an tattaqū minhum tuqātan* (“except when you need to protect yourselves from them”) (Q 3:28); or *ittaqu Allāh* (“fear Allāh”). From al-Zamakhsharī’s *Al-Kashshāf*.

Al-Balāgha (“rhetoric”):

Allāh’s words, *dhālik al-kitāb*, are an allusion towards glorification (from *Al-Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn*) and the finest of the meaning [or signification] is hidden in its being an

⁴⁰ Shahāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd bin ʿAbd Allāh al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Maʿānī fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān wa al-Sabʿ al-Mathānī*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Idāra al-Tibāʿa al-Munīra, 2008).

⁴¹ Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (Beirut: Muʾassasa Al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 2002).

⁴² Abū Muḥammad Al-Ḥusayn bin Masʿūd al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī: Maʿālim al-Tanzīl* (Al-Riyādh: Dār al-Ṭayyiba, 1989).

allusion to something far away. [This is also linked] to the fact that Sūrat al-Baqara is Medinan and there were many Jews present in Medina who had been informed in the Torah about the revelation of the Qur'an and thus this expression hints at that promised book (*al-kitāb al-maw'ūd*). Thus, when its news and information had been passed [long ago], the Qur'an chose an expression indicating distance. This has been told to me by Mawlānā Rashīd Aḥmad al-Gangohī [of Deoband], may his inspiration stay forever.

In the words, *hudan li-l-muttaqīn*, there is a brevity that indicates esteem [or appreciation] which refers to those who deviated and then abandoned their deviance and became God-fearing. And this expression also implies a kind of *al-ḥadhf al-iktifā'*, [a form of ellipsis indicating sufficiency], in which the context demands the mentioning of two things that have a correlation and are inter-connected but it is sufficient to mention one thing [out of the two], avoiding the other one. Similarly, the guidance (*hudā*) is for the *muttaqīn* and *kāfirīn* and this [understanding] is supported by Allāh's saying *hudan li-l-nās* (Q 2: 28). I would say that same can be applied to other explanations, such as for *yu'minūna bi-l-ghayb* [which implies] *yu'minūna bi-l-ghayb wa al-shahāda* ("they believe in the things both hidden and evident") because *īmān* requires both types of belief but only *al-ghayb* is mentioned here because *īmān* [already] entails *al-shahāda* and not the vice versa. From Suyūṭī's *Itqān*.

In the light of the above excerpt from Thānawī's commentary and given his overall *tafsīr* project including the principles of exegesis that he himself outlined in his introduction, three larger features emerge quite conspicuously out of his method of interpretation: 1) stress on the inter-connectedness of verses; 2) the use of pre-modern *tafsīr* resources; and 3) exegetical amplifications, that is, detailed elaborations of particular Qur'anic verses for the lay reader.⁴³ It is important to note that these three features that Thānawī's work displayed shaped his larger principles of interpretation that he followed and his interpretive techniques that he used while explaining the text. For instance, this interplay of features, principles, and techniques can be seen in his treatment of the concept of *rabṭ*. The concept of *rabṭ* helped Thānawī to show the inter-

⁴³ I use the term "amplification" in the sense that it involves further elaboration of a definition, description, or argument. In the end, more information is added to that text for the reader. In more technical terms, it is defined as a "device in which language is used to extend or magnify or emphasize. A part of rhetoric and common in oratory. Often used to attain a particular effect..." J.A. Cuddon, ed., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 30.

connectedness of verses in the Qur'an. From this he developed a principle that a better interpretation and reading of the Qur'anic text should be based on unfolding this feature. In order to highlight this *rabṭ* feature for ordinary readers, he developed certain techniques that enabled him to achieve his task. Thus, many of his interpretations displayed the above three features that shaped his overall method. In the following sections, I will be highlighting with examples how he envisaged his exegetical enterprise along with the historical reasons that compelled Thānawī to read the Qur'an in this light. I have chosen Sūrat al-Baqara as a particular case study in order to discuss his particular methods of interpretation. Since Thānawī did not elaborate his principles of exegesis in detail, a longer text like Sūrat al-Baqara can be helpful in unfolding his art of interpretation and the underlying hermeneutical ideas and techniques that shaped his work.

Thānawī's Interpretation of Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2)

Here I analyze in detail how Thānawī interpreted different sections of Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2) in terms of the three features and the underlying principles mentioned above. In order to have a better understanding and grasp of his method, referring to his text in the original is imperative.

Rabṭ-i Āyāt

One of the central features of Thānawī's exegesis is his stress on *rabṭ* between Qur'anic verses that he wanted to highlight to enable the reader to connect different sections with each other. Before we begin studying Thānawī's method, a basic orientation with the history of this concept is in order as it will help in understanding Thānawī and Farāhī better. This concept of *rabṭ* falls within the larger discussion of Qur'anic *naẓm*, which has a long history in the Muslim

tradition. For many modern historians of this concept,⁴⁴ the starting point seems to be the works of al-Rummānī (d. 996), al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 998), and al-Jurjānī (d. 1078), which are often anthologized in modern editions.⁴⁵ Mustansir Mir, while studying the works of Farāhī and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (d. 1997), has effectively traced this history of the development of the concept of *naẓm* in the Qur'an. To Mir, the idea of *naẓm* as a specific characteristic of the Qur'an probably emerged in relation to the discourse around the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an.⁴⁶ He then recognizes two strands of views in earlier works on *naẓm*. One group conceptualized the Qur'anic *naẓm* as a type of relationship between words and meanings, while the other group viewed it as a connection between Qur'anic verses, suras, or verses and suras both. This latter view is termed as linear *naẓm* by Mir. In the first group, while al-Khaṭṭābī took *naẓm* to mean the particular ways in which words are arranged in order to convey the intended meaning, al-Bāqillānī studied *naẓm* as part of *badī'*, the branch of *balāgha* that deals with the use of literary devices, which is employed for effective communication. In comparison to the above two, for al-Jurjānī, *naẓm* is the particular relationship of words to one another in a manner that establish a causal connection between them. I would also place Walī Allāh in this group.

Mir also gives us a sense of what linear *naẓm* means in the light of this conceptual history. Al-Zarkashī (d. 1391)⁴⁷ used the word *munāsabāt* to refer to those interrelationships of

⁴⁴ See Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*, 10-19; Michel Cuypers, "The Question of the Qur'an's Coherence in the History of its Exegesis," in *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'ān*, trans. Patricia Kelly (Miami: Convivium, 2009), 491-512.

⁴⁵ Muḥammad Khalf Allāh and Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām, eds., *Thalāth Rasā'il fī l'jāz al-Qur'ān li-l-Rummānī wa al-Khaṭṭābī wa 'Abd al-Qāhīr al-Jurjānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1968).

⁴⁶ The key Qur'anic verse around which *naẓm* discourse revolves is Q 2: 23 that reads: "If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it— enlist whatever supporters you have other than God— if you truly [think you can]."

⁴⁷ His main work that Mir refers to is al-Zarkashī's *Al-Burhān*.

verses that is apparently difficult to discover. By comparison, al-Rāzī⁴⁸ stressed on the importance of *naẓm* to discover Qur'anic *laṭā'if* ('subtly beautiful points'). He showed how one verse is related to the next in a continuous fashion until an unbroken linear connection between all the verses of a sura is established. Al-Ālūsī in his *Rūḥ al-Ma'ānī*, whom Thānawī frequently drew upon, also endeavoured to establish connections between suras but did not do so exhaustively.

Given the above brief history of the concept of *naẓm*, and before analyzing Thānawī's treatment of the Qur'anic notions of *naẓm* and *rabṭ*, I should make two further points clear regarding the concept of coherence that have a bearing on our understanding of the larger debates on the spread of that concept. First, in comparison to the pre-modern history of the concept, the concepts of *naẓm* and the unity of a sura took new shades in modern Qur'an commentaries both in the Arab world and in South Asia. This will be shown in my study of Thānawī, Farāhī, and other exegetes. Second, fascination with this concept also influenced to some extent new structuralist approaches to the Qur'an in the secular academy, and thus, a range of works sprouted up on the topic of the structure of the Qur'an based upon, for instance, the principles of Semitic rhetoric,⁴⁹ linguistic analysis,⁵⁰ or methods of historical philology and form criticism.⁵¹ In this chapter, I am specifically interested in analyzing the nature of these *naẓm* approaches to the Qur'anic text through the lens of Thānawī's *tafsīr*, not only from a linguistic

⁴⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-Mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981).

⁴⁹ Michel Cuypers, *The Banquet: A Reading of the Fifth Sura of the Qur'ān*, trans. Patricia Kelly (Miami: Convivium, 2009).

⁵⁰ Salwa M.S. El-Awa, *Textual Relation in the Qur'an: Relevance, Coherence, and Structure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁵¹ Angelika Neuwirth, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: Die literarische Form der Koran – ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?* (1981; repr., Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

standpoint but from a historical perspective as well, particularly in terms of the larger historical milieu of colonial India that fostered such type of hermeneutical thinking.

With the above preliminary points in mind, we can note that Thānawī's view of *rabṭ* in the Qur'an falls *prima facie* into the category of linear *naẓm*. We can understand his method through considering pertinent examples from his *tafsīr* and thus, try to conceptualize his technique of showing *rabṭ*. Thānawī tried to establish *rabṭ* in Qur'anic verses along two dimensions. He constructed this *rabṭ* either through operational techniques or through his own individual creativity, which was based on either historical and literary cues in the text, or on his own specific religious worldviews.

First, we take a look at his operational techniques to construct *rabṭ*. By operational techniques, I mean the ways Thānawī constructed an apparently smooth, stabilized structure of the Qur'anic text for an ordinary reader. Sometimes, these techniques were based on precedents found in the pre-modern *tafsīr* as well. Foremost among his operational techniques was to establish a clear *relationship* between two suras or two sections into which Thānawī divided a text. Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2) was presented as a divine answer to the prayer offered by a believer in Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1). Similarly making connections between different sets of verses was another frequent act of creating *rabṭ*. For this purpose, we can study the verses Q 2:1-10 which Thānawī understood as two passages that he attempted to inter-connect for the reader:

1 Alif Lam Mim, 2 This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, 3 who believe in the unseen, keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them; 4 those who believe in the revelation sent down to you [Muhammad], and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the Hereafter. 5 Such people are following their Lord's guidance and it is they who will prosper.

6 As for those who disbelieve, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. 7 God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered. They will have great torment. 8 Some people say, ‘We believe in God and the Last Day,’ when really they do not believe. 9 They seek to deceive God and the believers but they only deceive themselves, though they do not realize it. 10 There is a disease in their hearts, to which God has added more: agonizing torment awaits them for their persistent lying.

He clarified that the verses 1-5 discussed the group of *mu'minūn* who believe in the Qur'an; the verses from 6-10 and onwards, all the way till the verse 20, discuss different groups or types of *munāfiqūn*. Here the aim for Thānawī was to facilitate the understanding of the modern reader. Thus, the ancient text seemed to follow a modern way of organizing a book – one discourse (of *mu'minūn*) making logical transitions to another (of *munāfiqūn*).⁵²

Another of Thānawī's operational technique was to synthesize what the reader had learnt at different points during his explication of Sūrat al-Baqara. Moreover, Thānawī also anticipated what was going to be discussed shortly in the text. These two techniques worked together at times in his *tafsīr*. We give a look at the verses 25-26 which read:

25 [Prophet], give those who believe and do good the news that they will have Gardens graced with flowing streams. Whenever they are given sustenance from the fruits of these Gardens, they will say, ‘We have been given this before,’ because they were provided with something like it. They will have pure spouses and there they will stay.

26 God does not shy from drawing comparisons even with something as small as a gnat, or larger: the believers know it is the truth from their Lord, but the disbelievers say, ‘What does God mean by such a comparison?’ Through it He makes many go astray and leads many to the right path. But it is only the rebels He makes go astray.

At the end of his exegesis of the verse 25 and the beginning of the verse 26, Thānawī wrote:

In the beginning of the sura, the purpose of mentioning the believers was to highlight the greatness of the Qur'an in that it guides people of such and such qualities. Thus,

⁵² *TBQ*, vol. 1, 24.

in this connection, the merits (*faḍā'il*) of *īmān* were also discussed as an additional topic. [By contrast] here [at verse 25], the merits of *īmān* are being discussed purposefully for their own right. Therefore, there is no issue of repetition here. And the expression “for they are given things in similitude” shows that they will receive the same fruit every time in terms of its appearance, which they will take as the same, but every time, they will enjoy an added taste. *Till that point*,⁵³ it has been proved that Qur'an is a book of God. One should understand that a claimant has two things to do: first to establish his opinion through evidence; second to answer the opponent's critique. *From now onwards* [from verse 26], the Qur'an begins replying to this criticism.⁵⁴

During the course of Thānawī's *tafsīr*, this operational technique of synthesizing acquires a somewhat established character, and the reader discerns that the exegete has achieved a kind of facility with his exegesis that can have an impact on the ordinary reader as well who studies the Qur'an for guidance. In a way Thānawī takes the reader with him through this journey of reading the scripture. This is also reflected in the common trope of Urdu expressions *ūpar* (“above”) and *āgē* (“following”) which the exegete uses for making the reader feel comfortable with the text. This trope contributes to the reader's awareness of the inter-connections of Qur'anic passages.

⁵³ The Urdu expression *yahān tak* (“up to this point”) is frequently used by Thānawī to recapitulate for the reader what he has studied until that point in order to facilitate his reading. Cf. *TBQ*, vol. 1, 24.

⁵⁴ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 35; emphasis added.

For the verses 151-157,⁵⁵ 158-162,⁵⁶ and 243-245,⁵⁷ the reader is constantly guided as to how the preceding discourse is connected with the one following it. Another instance of this technique is shown in the exegete's connecting back after an apparent distraction or a remove, that is, his use of the Arabic literary trope, *'awd ilā al-bad'* ("returning to the beginning"). Thus, after the discussion of *ba'ūḍa* ("mosquito") in the verse 26, the exegete instructs the reader that from now onwards the discourse is again starting from the earlier verse 21.⁵⁸

We can also read Thānawī's treatment of the legal injunctions as his attempt to construct an operational *rabṭ*. Starting from the verse 178,⁵⁹ he numbered all the legal injunctions revealed

⁵⁵ Q 2: 151-157: "149 [Prophet], wherever you may have started out, turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque— this is the truth from your Lord: He is not unaware of what you do— 150 wherever you may have started out, turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque; wherever any of you may be, turn your faces towards it, so that people may have no argument against you – except for the wrongdoers among them: do not fear them; fear Me— and so that I may perfect My favour on you and you may be guided, 151 just as We have sent among you a Messenger of your own to recite Our revelations to you, purify you and teach you the Scripture, wisdom, and [other] things you did not know. 152 So remember Me; I will remember you. Be thankful to Me, and never ungrateful. 153 You who believe, seek help through steadfastness and prayer, for God is with the steadfast. 154 Do not say that those who are killed in God's cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it. 155 We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops. But [Prophet], give good news to those who are steadfast, 156 those who say, when afflicted with a calamity, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return.' 157 These will be given blessings and mercy from their Lord, and it is they who are rightly guided."

⁵⁶ Q 2: 158-162: "158 Safa and Marwa are among the rites of God, so for those who make major or minor pilgrimage to the House it is no offence to circulate between the two. Anyone who does good of his own accord will be rewarded, for God rewards good deeds, and knows everything. 159 As for those who hide the proofs and guidance We send down, after We have made them clear to people in the Scripture, God rejects them, and so do others, 160 unless they repent, make amends, and declare the truth. I will certainly accept their repentance: I am the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. 161 As for those who disbelieve and die as disbelievers, God rejects them, as do the angels and all people. 162 They will remain in this state of rejection: their punishment will not be lightened, nor will they be reprieved."

⁵⁷ Q 2: 243-245: "243 [Prophet], consider those people who abandoned their homeland in fear of death, even though there were thousands of them. God said to them, 'Die!' and then brought them back to life again; God shows real favour to people, but most of them are ungrateful. 244 Fight in God's cause and remember that He is all hearing and all knowing. 245 Who will give God a good loan, which He will increase for him many times over? It is God who withholds and God who gives abundantly, and it is to Him that you will return."

⁵⁸ Q 2:21: "People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful [of Him]."

⁵⁹ Q 2: 178: "You who believe, fair retribution is prescribed for you in cases of murder: the free man for the free man, the slave for the slave, the female for the female. But if the culprit is pardoned by his aggrieved brother, this shall be adhered to fairly, and the culprit shall pay what is due in a good way. This is an alleviation from your Lord and an act of mercy. If anyone then exceeds these limits, grievous suffering awaits him."

in the text onwards, along with discussing the issues of *fiqh* involved in the legal injunctions.⁶⁰

This operational technique is also similar to his guiding the reader when a long discourse is about to begin in the Qur'an such as the saga of the biblical Israelite nation. At the beginning of the verse 40,⁶¹ he wrote:

[The Qur'an] mentions up to this point the [God's] general blessings (*nī^cmat-i ʿāmma ma^cnawīyya*) and for this purpose the story of Adam is discussed. From now onwards, it mentions [His] special blessings (*nī^cmat-i khāṣā*) that was being bestowed on the ʿulamāʾ of that time. There were no scholars among *mushrikūn* ("polytheists") of Arabia but the People of the Book did have such ʿulamāʾ. Banī Isrāʾīl ("Children of Israel") were in the majority among such people. On them, there had been showers of blessings going on for many generations. They used to boast and felt distinguished for their pedigrees, political powers, and sainthood. For this reason, now Banī Isrāʾīl are being addressed here and the blessings on them are counted so that they will accept *īmān*, having felt embarrassed [for their defaulting on their promises to God]. Since they were scholars, their acceptance of *īmān* could result in favourable effect on other people. Thus, they are first reminded of these favours in a general tone here and then from the next section (*rukū^c*) till the end of the next division of the text, all details will be given [of these favours] and at the end of this list of blessings, there will be again such kind of generic statement [which you will read]. This is because the rule says that what is intended (*maqsūd-i a^czām*) is mentioned in the beginning and it is mentioned again after providing all the details.⁶²

After introducing this long commentary on biblical material, Thānawī also numbered the different episodes or divine transactions (*mu^cāmalāt*) that begin from the verse 49.⁶³ For the lay reader to whom Thānawī directed his work, the end result of all this stabilization was the

⁶⁰ Three of Thānawī's students collaborated to write an exegesis of the Qur'anic verses that deal with legal issues, based on his teachings and inputs (*afādāt*). See Zafar Aḥmad ʿUthmānī, Muftī Muḥammad Shafīʿ, and Idrīs Kāndihlawī, *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, trans. Muḥammad Zikriyā Iqbāl, 2 vols. (Karachi: Dār al-Ishāʿat, 2016). Originally composed circa 1942 by the three authors.

⁶¹ The verse Q 2: 40 reads: "Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you. Honour your pledge to Me and I will honour My pledge to you: I am the One you should fear."

⁶² *TBQ*, vol. 1, 47.

⁶³ Q 2:49: "Remember when We saved you from Pharaoh's people, who subjected you to terrible torment, slaughtering your sons and sparing only your women— this was a great trial from your Lord."

emergence of a Qur’anic text free from any difficulty that it may present. In a nutshell, Thānawī had effectively responded, if only indirectly, to European criticism of the structure of the Qur’an.

Thānawī’s second technique to construct *rabṭ* lay in his own creative ways of connecting the verses and passages within the text. This kind of technique reflected his imaginative forms of interaction with the text and the Muslim scholarly and historical tradition. The first of such techniques involved having recourse to certain meta-themes to stabilize the text and reveal a *rabṭ* that was hidden in his opinion. The themes of *tawḥīd* (“the oneness of God”), *risāla* (“prophethood”), and *īmān* (“belief”) were parts of the staple thought upon which Thānawī drew to enable the creation of an easy-to-understand divine text. A relevant pericope can be Q 2:21-24 where Thānawī’s *tafsīr* depicted his creativity of interpretation around these themes. The verses read as follows:

21 People, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be mindful [of Him] 22 who spread out the earth for you and built the sky; who sent water down from it and with that water produced things for your sustenance. Do not, knowing this, set up rivals to God. 23 If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it– enlist whatever supporters you have other than God– if you truly [think you can]. 24 If you cannot do this– and you never will– then beware of the Fire prepared for the disbelievers, whose fuel is men and stones.

In order to connect the themes of the verses 22 and 23, Thānawī offered his exegesis in the following words:

This means that you know that these [grand things] cannot be done by anyone other than Allāh. Thus, it is not fair that you worship deities other than Him. After this, [Allāh] discusses the issue of prophethood (*risāla*). It is noteworthy that the clear and evident basis of *risāla* is some miracle. Hence, the Prophet had been given countless miracles, of which the biggest one is the Qur’an, a supreme evidence of the truth of [his] prophethood. His opponents had doubted its divine creation and believed that the Prophet Muhammad wrote the Qur’an himself. If this were so, it would make it difficult to believe that the Qur’an is a divine book. Hence, the evidence for the

prophethood came under doubt. For this reason, Allāh dismisses this doubt in the next verse.⁶⁴

A second kind of interpretive technique in this category was manifested in Thānawī's interpreting the mind and life of the Prophet in order to connect a particular passage with other passages. A good illustration of this technique is seen for Q 2:115-119. The verses say:

115 The East and the West belong to God: wherever you turn, there is His Face. God is all pervading and all knowing. 116 They have asserted, 'God has a child.' May He be exalted! No! Everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him, everything devoutly obeys His will. 117 He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth, and when He decrees something, He says only, 'Be,' and it is. 118 Those who have no knowledge also say, 'If only God would speak to us!' or 'If only a miraculous sign would come to us!' People before them said the same things: their hearts are all alike. We have made Our signs clear enough to those who have solid faith. 119 We have sent you [the Prophet] with the truth, bearing good news and warning. You will not be responsible for the inhabitants of the Blaze.

Thānawī explained the larger context of these and preceding verses in the following historically imaginative manner:

Up to this point, forty wrongs committed by the Jews, sins in which *naṣārā* ("Christians") sometimes participated as well, have been mentioned. From now onwards, it is clarified that there is no use in keeping any hopes for *īmān* from these stubborn people. So, this idea is the result of what has been mentioned above...and it also embodies in it the idea of the removal of the Prophet's grief and sorrow due to his disappointment [with the People of the Book] or losing hope in their embracing *īmān*... and also betrayed the idea that in the beginning the Prophet, due to showing some sympathy towards the People of the Book, sometimes tended to agree on matters unclear (*al-umūr al-mubāḥa*).⁶⁵

Another way of creatively finding *rabī* in Qur'anic verses was by bringing some historical context to explain the verses. In the verses 229-230, the context of *Jāhiliyya* was applied to connect the verse 230 with the verse 229. The verses read as follows:

⁶⁴ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 33.

⁶⁵ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 87.

229 Divorce can happen twice, and [each time] wives are either kept on in an acceptable manner or released in a good way (*imsākun bi-ma^crūf a^oū tasrīhun bi-iḥsān*). It is not lawful for you to take back anything that you have given [your wives], except where both [of you] fear that you cannot maintain [the marriage] within the bounds set by God: if you [arbiters] suspect that the couple may not be able to do this, then there will be no blame on either of them if the woman opts to give something for her release. These are the bounds set by God: do not overstep them. It is those who overstep God's bounds who are doing wrong. 230 If a husband re-divorces his wife after the second divorce, she will not be lawful for him [to marry] until she has taken another husband; if that one divorces her, there will be no blame if she and the first husband return to one another, provided they feel that they can keep within the bounds set by God. These are God's bounds, which He makes clear for those who know.

Thānawī explained them as follows:

In the above verse (229), the expressions *imsākun bi-ma^crūf* and *tasrīhun bi-iḥsān* are mentioned. In the following verse (230), *this is repeated because [people] used to be negligent of that* and thus, the repetition has resulted in attention, exhortation, and hyperbole [emphasis added].⁶⁶

Linguistically, Thānawī's *tafsīr* also imagined *rabṭ* through either explaining a verse or a set of verses as a continuation of or a supplement to the preceding verses. The verse 59 is read as a *tatimma* ("supplement") to the verse 58. The verses 58-59 say:

58 Remember when We said, 'Enter this town and eat freely there as you will, but enter its gate humbly and say, "Relieve us!" (*ḥaṭṭatun*) Then We shall forgive you your sins and increase the rewards of those who do good.' 59 But the wrongdoers substituted a different word for the one they had been given. So, because they persistently disobeyed, We sent a plague down from the heavens upon the wrongdoers.

Thānawī explained that the verse 58 relates how God instructed the Jews in the Bible to use the word *ḥaṭṭatun* ("seeking repentance"). But they changed the word to another expression. And thus, the verse 59 explains their sin. Thānawī wrote about the verse 59:

⁶⁶ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 163. Here by repetition, Thānawī meant God's stressing twice the moral limits set by Him, which believers should follow, and not transgress.

This [verse] acts as a supplement to the verse 58. The originally revealed word, that is, *ḥaṭṭatun* (which signified repentance) was changed sarcastically to *ḥubbatun fī sha‘īratin*, which meant “grain in the middle of barley.”⁶⁷ Thus, this rebellious attitude resulted in the outbreak of plague, and many were killed in that.⁶⁸

Moreover, the exegete sometimes also assumed that there could be a question regarding certain verses in the mind of the reader, and thus, he tried to explain such matters in anticipation. For the verses 62-67,⁶⁹ he began by saying:

...here after knowing the mischiefs by the Jews, *readers or a Jew himself* [emphasis added] can think that now probably our *īmān* cannot be acceptable even if we apologize. Therefore, in order to eliminate this idea, the following verses [that is, verses 62-67] mention an absolute principle.⁷⁰

Invoking the Pre-Modern Exegetical Tradition

After *rabī*, Thānawī’s second important meta-principle was to interpret the Qur’an through an active engagement with the Muslim scholarly tradition of Qur’anic exegesis. In order to highlight this, I have here examined Thānawī’s *tafsīr* along two axes which manifest his: 1) use of historical narratives related to Qur’anic verses (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); and 2) view of the Qur’anic *naskh* principle.

⁶⁷ There is a debate in pre-modern commentaries on what is actually meant by this phrase *ḥubbatun fī sha‘īratin* in the context of the verses.

⁶⁸ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 56.

⁶⁹ Q 2: 62-67: “62 The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good– will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve. 63 Remember when We took your pledge, and made the mountain tower high above you, and said, ‘Hold fast to what We have given you and bear its contents in mind, so that you may be conscious of God.’ 64 Even after that you turned away. Had it not been for God’s favour and mercy on you, you would certainly have been lost. 65 You know about those of you who broke the Sabbath, and so We said to them, ‘Be like apes! Be outcasts!’ 66 We made this an example to those people who were there at the time and to those who came after them, and a lesson to all who are mindful of God. 67 Remember when Moses said to his people, ‘God commands you to sacrifice a cow.’ They said, ‘Are you making fun of us?’ He answered, ‘God forbid that I should be so ignorant.’”

⁷⁰ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 58.

Thānawī's Use of Asbāb al-Nuzūl

Deploying historical narratives as the sub-text of his exegetical glosses for the lay reader was Thānawī's basic interpretive technique. To him, one way of writing an exegesis for his audience was to frame his *tafsīr* on the canvas of the Muslim tradition. We can take Q 2:26 as a case in point. The verse reads:

God does not shy from drawing comparisons even with something as small as a gnat, or larger: the believers know it is the truth from their Lord, but the disbelievers say, 'What does God mean by such a comparison?' Through it He makes many go astray and leads many to the right path. But it is only the rebels He makes go astray.

Thānawī mentioned the *asbāb al-nuzūl* in the Arabic portion of his exegesis (written for specialists)⁷¹ by making note of three contexts of the revelation (recorded by al-Suyūṭī in his *Lubāb al-Nuqūl fī Asbāb al-Nuzūl*)⁷² as a response to the criticism of *munāfiqūn* and *mushrikūn*. When *munāfiqūn* heard the two parables of fire and rain in the verses 17-20,⁷³ they raised questions about why God was coining these metaphors when He is the most exalted, and thus, as an answer this verse was revealed. Similarly, when *mushrikūn*, having read the mention of a fly (*al-dhubāb*) and spider (*al-[°]ankabūt*) in the Qur'an, inquired about the reason for mentioning such lowly creatures, this particular revelation occurred. Al-Suyūṭī had offered his own opinion that the first tradition was more authentic.⁷⁴ Moreover, he did not consider the mention of

⁷¹ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 36.

⁷² Al-Suyūṭī, *Lubāb al-Nuqūl*. Another work that Thānawī drew upon for noting *asbāb* was Abū al-Ḥasan °Alī bin Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-°Ilmiyya, 1991).

⁷³ Q 2: 17-20: "17 They are like people who [labour to] kindle a fire: when it lights up everything around them, God takes away all their light, leaving them in utter darkness, unable to see— 18 deaf, dumb, and blind: they will never return. 19 Or [like people who, under] a cloudburst from the sky, with its darkness, thunder, and lightning, put their fingers into their ears to keep out the thunderclaps for fear of death— God surrounds the disbelievers. 20 The lightning almost snatches away their sight: whenever it flashes on."

⁷⁴ He is probably referring to the earlier *sabab* that said that the first four verses of the sura concerned *mu'minūn* ("believers"), the next two concerned *kafirūn* ("disbelievers" or "infidels"), and the next thirteen verses concerned *munāfiqūn* ("hypocrites"). Thānawī also records this *sabab* while explaining the verses 1-4. See above p. 184.

mushrikūn in the *sabab* as something questioning the status of Sūrat al-Baqara as being Medinan. Thānawī shared this opinion of al-Suyūṭī but explained that the Qur'an was quite broad in its message, even during the Medinan period of the Prophet's life.⁷⁵ Thānawī drew upon the pre-modern *tafsīr* of Abū al-Sa'ūd for this last opinion as well.

For verses, where no narratives existed in al-Wāḥidī or al-Suyūṭī, Thānawī, in order to provide context to the verses, used non-*asbāb* quotations mostly from al-Suyūṭī's *Tafsīr al-Durr al-Manthūr*, or in some cases from other books of *tafāsīr*, such as *al-Kashshāf* of al-Zamakhsharī or from books of Ḥadīth. On many such occasions, he tried to explain the verses in the light of the historical context and larger semantical range propounded by the tradition of *tafsīr* works. Let us consider the case of Q 2:29. The verse reads as follows:

It was He who created all that is on the earth for you, then turned to the sky and made the seven heavens; it is He who has knowledge of all things.
There is no *sabab* on this found in the standard books of *asbāb* genre. Thānawī relied on al-Suyūṭī's *tafsīr* to trace the picture of the creation of heavens and the earth in different phases, beginning with the creation of water.⁷⁶

It is important to note that Thānawī did not dwell much upon such historical narratives and exegetical traditions and on occasions when he would invoke them, he seemed to quote or mention them in order to show his commitment to the larger Muslim scholarly tradition. These traditions only provided the canvas onto which he wove his explanatory remarks for the ordinary reader.

⁷⁵ This thinking also reminds us of how Thānawī conceived *rabṭ* through historical imagining as discussed in the section above that deals with his view of the inter-connectedness of verses.

⁷⁶ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 38.

Thānawī's Application of the Naskh Principle

The best way to get an idea of Thānawī's position on *naskh* is to examine his exegetical practice. In his exegesis of the key verse Q 2:106⁷⁷ related to the discussion of *naskh* in Qur'anic studies, he wrote in his *tafsīr*:

(The Jews taunted [the believers] for the change in the commandment regarding Qibla, discussion of which is forthcoming; and the *mushrikūn* were also objecting to the abrogation of some injunctions; the Almighty Allāh [thus] answers these jeering remarks and criticisms by saying that when) We suspend any verse containing some injunction (no matter if the verse remains in the minds) or We make this verse to be forgotten (from the minds), then this is not something to object to (because there is always some reason behind it and hence) We bring a better or a similar verse (instead of something totally different); (so O the Objector) don't you know that Allāh is capable of everything (so such an All Powerful Being can take care of special needs) and don't you know that Allāh the Almighty is the One Whom the kingdom of the heavens and the earth belongs to. (Thus, when nobody shares His power and kingdom, then who can object to His changing of order by accounting for the needs of the times; hence there is nobody stopping Him from issuing a second order or keeping the earlier injunction in place) and (also try to understand that) your Lord is the only Friend and Supporter of yours. (Thus, in His capacity as a Friend, He will definitely take care of the circumstances to issue new orders; and in His capacity as a Supporter, he will help you by protecting against the evil doings of your opponents; however if the benefits in the hereafter are more than the harms of this world, then such harms can take effect) **fa:** The second [or new] order can be better or similar according to its reward [in the hereafter] or sometimes according to the ease required in the new circumstances which may result in the abrogation of the injunction. *If some Qur'anic injunction is abrogated by a ḥadīth then the latter is also something given by Allāh; in short, it covers all forms of abrogation (naskh)... In this verse, Allāh has gathered all kinds of stipulations related to the naskh [emphasis added].*⁷⁸

Apart from this Qur'anic site, he also wrote a strong rebuttal of a notable scholar-activist of twentieth-century colonial India, °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī (d. 1948) for the latter's apparent

⁷⁷ It is useful to read the verse along with 105. See Q 2: 105-106: "105 Neither those People of the Book who disbelieve nor the idolaters would like anything good to be sent down to you from your Lord, but God chooses for His grace whoever He will: His bounty has no limits. 106 Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar. Do you [Prophet] not know that God has power over everything?"

⁷⁸ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 80-81.

dismissal of the principle of *naskh*.⁷⁹ Born in the Punjab, Sindhī, a Sikh convert to Islam, also studied at Deoband and later embarked on a strongly Islamic militant career. We will study more of Thānawī's criticism of Sindhī shortly but what was evident from this censure was Thānawī's strong commitment to the application of this principle in the interpretation of the Qur'an in the light of the plurality of approaches on this issue. We can consider three instances as particular case studies of Thānawī's subscribing to the broad idea of *naskh* in Qur'anic interpretation as reflected in the classical books⁸⁰ on the topic. First, it is generally understood that the verse Q 2:185 abrogated the verse Q 2: 184, which read as follows:

184 Fast for a specific number of days, but if one of you is ill, or on a journey, on other days later. For those who can fast only with extreme difficulty, there is a way to compensate— feed a needy person. But if anyone does good of his own accord, it is better for him, and fasting is better for you, if only you knew.

185 It was in the month of Ramadan that the Quran was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So, any one of you who is present that month should fast, and anyone who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful.

Thānawī, in line with traditional understanding, considered the verse 185 as abrogating the verse 184. Thus, the injunction related to the feeding of the indigent as a compensation of not fasting during the month of Ramadan was no longer valid.⁸¹ The second case pertains to the perceived abrogation of Q 2:221 by Q 5: 5. The two verses read as follows:

Q 2: 221: Do not marry idolatresses until they believe: a believing slave woman is certainly better than an idolatress, even though she may please you. And do not give your women in marriage to idolaters until they believe: a believing slave is certainly

⁷⁹ °Abd al-Qādir Āzād, "Thānawī Bahaythiyat-i Mufasssir," 299-315. °Abd al-Qādir Āzād uses Thānawī's work, *Al-Taḥqīq fī al-Tafsīr* (Deoband: Maṭba' Qāsmī, ca. 1929) which is not accessible to me.

⁸⁰ Abū °Ubayd al-Qāsim bin Sallām, *Al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh fī al-Qur'ān al-°Azīz wa mā fīhi min al-Farā'id wa al-Sunan* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2001); Abū Manṣūr °Abd al-Qāhir bin Ṭāhir bin Muḥammad al-Baghdādī, *Al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh* (Amman: Dār al-°Udwī, 1999).

⁸¹ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 129.

better than an idolater, even though he may please you. Such people call [you] to the Fire, while God calls [you] to the Garden and forgiveness by His leave. He makes His messages clear to people, so that they may bear them in mind.

Q 5:5: Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them. So are chaste, believing, women as well as chaste women of the people who were given the Scripture before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and married them, not taking them as lovers or secret mistresses. The deeds of anyone who rejects faith will come to nothing, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers.

Thānawī explained that the part of the verse Q 2:221 “Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters), until they believe,” implied that believers cannot marry even the women of the People of the Book (both Jews and Christians). However, he clarified that the verse Q 5:5 had abrogated this part of the earlier verse by saying: “as well as chaste women of the people who were given the Scripture before you.”⁸²

The third is the case of Q 2:219 abrogated by Q 5:90-91. The verses read as follows:

Q 2:219: They ask you [the Prophet] about intoxicants and gambling: say, ‘There is great sin in both, and some benefit for people: the sin is greater than the benefit.’ They ask you what they should give: say, ‘Give what you can spare.’ In this way, God makes His messages clear to you, so that you may reflect

Q 5:90-91: 90 You who believe, intoxicants and gambling, idolatrous practices, and [divining with] arrows are repugnant acts— Satan’s doing—shun them so that you may prosper. 91 With intoxicants and gambling, Satan seeks only to incite enmity and hatred among you, and to stop you remembering God and prayer. Will you not give them up?

Thānawī explained under Q 2:219 that till the revelation of this verse, wine and gambling were legitimate which meant that both these things were not unlawful per se, but pursuing them would lead to other sins, such as losing one’s capacity for thinking in the case of drinking and pursuing greed in the case of gambling. He elaborated further that this legitimising of the two led to other

⁸² *TBQ*, vol. 1, 155-156.

sins like instances in which people performed ritual prayer after drinking. Therefore, the new verses in Sūrat al-Māʾida (Q 5) abrogated the verse of Sūrat al-Baqara. The previous allowance led to a distancing from *īmān* which in turn caused a coming closer to *kufr* (*jab īmān sē buʿad hūā to kufr sē qurb hūā*).⁸³

What we can conclude from the above investigation of Thānawī's approach to *asbāb* and *naskh* is that he subscribed to some well-known positions in the Muslim tradition on the issues related to the two topics. However, as we will read in the next section on his amplification of Qur'anic verses, he always constructed new explanations as well despite his explicitly or implicitly subscribing to traditional understanding of verses and their contexts of revelation.

Thānawī's Exegetical Amplifications

Thānawī's contemporary audience was the main focus of his exegesis. Therefore, he used to offer many amplifications on Qur'anic verses to make it understandable to ordinary believers in his context. First point to note is that his exegetical amplifications were always built on the canvas of the pre-modern exegetical tradition. At times, he simply mentioned his opinions briefly that fell within the range of earlier understandings of the Qur'an and at other occasions, he would dwell upon the text for long wherever he felt that the readers expected more details. Before I explain in the next section his exegetical amplifications as a consequence of particular historical circumstances, it will be useful to acquaint ourselves with some of his hermeneutical strategies and some key textual sites where he amplified the Qur'anic text at length. Only reading him directly can bring to the fore the creativity in his art of interpretation.

One of his most visible strategies was to explain philosophical and theological themes at length for the purpose of answering questions that were either posed to him or imagined by him.

⁸³ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 511.

For the verse Q 2:7 that reads: “God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered. They will have great torment,” he elucidated in the following manner on the issue of predestination and free will:

One should not understand by this that if Allāh gave us this news about them [and their disbelief], and that the possibility of something happening against Allāh’s news [or knowledge] is impossible, then we should consider them incapable of coming to belief. The fact of the matter is that it is like a saying of an expert physician to a patient of tuberculosis that his disease has reached the fourth level and that he will no longer be cured. It is clear that this patient was not afflicted by tuberculosis by the prognosis of the physician. He became ill because of his own carelessness...In the same manner, one should understand that a *kāfir*’s (“disbeliever”) being unable to believe occurred not due to Allāh’s informing us; instead Allāh’s giving us this news itself happened due to the *kāfir*’s incapacity to come to the belief...As a ḥadīth explains that this person opposes *ḥaqq* (“truth”) due to his self-centredness (*hawā’ē nafsī*) and selfishness till to the point that his capacity to accept the truth vanishes...and a spiritual physician would give us verdict that he will not accept *ḥaqq* from now onwards.⁸⁴

Similarly, consider the verse Q 2:143:

We have made you [believers] into a just community, so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you. We only made the direction the one you used to face [the Prophet] in order to distinguish (*li-na’lam*) those who follow the Messenger from those who turn on their heels: that test was hard, except for those God has guided. God would never let your faith go to waste [believers], for God is most compassionate and most merciful towards people.

Being conscious of the Indian and the larger exegetical tradition, Thānawī laboured hard to come to grips with this theological issue of God’s advanced knowledge as supposedly implied in the Arabic phrase *li-na’lam* (“so that We may know”; translated above by the English translator as “in order to distinguish”) and its relationship with human free will. He, thus, wrote in a complex expression:

The reason is that God, in fact, knows all matters in advance, and the people of truth have a faith in this fact as well, but before something happens, since people themselves do not know about this, that is why they do not have faith in terms of

⁸⁴ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 24-25.

specific details that God knew this event in advance. After the happening of the event, it is also made clear that what is meant by knowing something in advance. Another explanation of this can be the one given in *Tafsīr-i Mazharī*, through Shaykh Abū Manṣūr, that the meaning of the verses is that the thing which We knew that it will be brought into existence, this knowledge of [future creation] will be known in the present because God knows the things from the beginning which He wants to bring into existence in terms of the time of its happening but it is not correct to say that He know things from the beginning in such a manner that these exist as such because if these do not exist in actuality then how can He know these in advance and this change happened in what was known and not in [His] knowledge. So now there remained no problem [in understanding this].⁸⁵

Another major way Thānawī amplified the text was by bringing in examples from daily life for ordinary readers, particularly drawing upon his knowledge of medicine. He normally did not bring exegetical traditions and *asbāb al-nuzūl* into the main Urdu text, but instead attempted to clarify his meaning there through everyday examples. In the case of the verse Q 2:26,⁸⁶ which I discussed under *asbāb al-nuzūl*, he quite creatively imagined an analogy from the medical sciences to explain it for the common audience. He wrote:

This theme is analogous to the action of an eye physician who prepared a number of optical lenses in order to distribute them among his patients having weak eye-sight so that they help in seeing things, far and near, clearly. Among them, one stupid patient started picking at those lenses and made them pierce his eyes, so that they resulted in further weakening of his eyesight. As a result, he started saying that these lenses are of no use and in fact damage one's eyes. The physician, on hearing this, explained to him their proper use. But that stupid person kept on saying his useless ideas and stubbornly kept on asking the physician why he made these lenses. In such a situation, obviously such a senseless person will be told that the reason for making these lenses was that it would benefit the eyes of others and damage yours. But the fact of the matter is that the reason for all these kinds of lenses is giving sight. The bad result of these lenses in the case of that stupid person was due to his own poor use of them. Therefore, the real purpose of these verses and of the mosquito example is guidance for which the Qur'an was revealed. But the bad result of this is due to that person's own enmity and ignorance.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 102.

⁸⁶ Q2:26: "God does not shy from drawing comparisons even with something as small as a gnat, or larger: the believers know it is the truth from their Lord, but the disbelievers say, 'What does God mean by such a comparison?' Through it He makes many go astray and leads many to the right path. But it is only the rebels He makes go astray."

⁸⁷ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 35.

Similarly, in the case of the verse Q 2:153,⁸⁸ he elaborated:

Athar ṣabr wa-ṣalāt dar takhfīf gham (“the impact of patience (or steadfastness) and ritual prayer in their mitigating the grief”): the role of patience in mitigating grief is apparent and observable. Regarding the question that what *ṣalāt* (“ritual prayer”) has to do with this, first, like some active medicines that have a specific purpose and experience dictate the use of them, in the same manner, if some acts or deeds are also for specific purposes, then what is strange about this? Therefore, the *ṣalāt* that is offered with the presence of heart, without which the *ṣalāt* is like a useless medicine (*dawā’ē kuhna*), can be tested by anyone who wishes to do so for this specific purpose because there will be no question remaining after it is observed [for this specific quality], and if like the specific medicine for a specific purpose, *ṣalāt* needs to be tested for its rational cause, then its underlying reasoning can be understood as well because the decrease in grief is dependent upon distracting the heart to anything else - this relieves your heart. Thus, when the *ṣalāt* is offered with the presence of the heart, it will lead one to focus on the worship and the worshipped and the repetition of this will really lead to the heart’s liberation from overwhelming grief, and its impact will start diminishing.⁸⁹

Another conspicuous way he helped readers understand the Qur’an was by entering into debate on issues related to other religions. Let us read Q 2:93 that says:

Remember when We took your pledge, making the mountain tower above you, and said, ‘Hold on firmly to what We have given you, and listen to [what We say].’ They said, ‘We hear and we disobey,’ and through their disbelief they were made to drink [the love of] the calf deep into their hearts.

Thānawī explained:

The end result of these circumstances and the underlying causes was that when they reached down the river, they uttered a statement of denial despite the fact that they repented after the admonition and scolding by the prophet Moses. However, there are levels and degrees of repentance. Because of not having the repentance of the highest degree, some of its darkness remained in the heart. This grew into the worship of the calf. Then some of them were killed as a repentance and others were forgiven without being killed...In any case, the weakness of repentance and the effect of the lack of hatred resulted in *raf’ tūr* (“making the mountain tower above you”) and also the acceptance did not show an agreement between what is said and what it actually is.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Q 2:153: “You who believe, seek help through steadfastness and prayer, for God is with the steadfast.”

⁸⁹ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 109.

⁹⁰ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 72.

The verses Q 2: 94-95 say:

94 Say, 'How evil are the things your belief commands you to do, if you really are believers!' Say, 'If the last home with God is to be for you alone and no one else, then you should long for death, if your claim is true.' 95 But they will never long for death, because of what they have stored up with their own hands: God is fully aware of the evildoers.

Thānawī explained:

It all says that we are on the *ḥaqq* ("on the right path") and we will be successful in the hereafter. Because of the revoking of their religion, they were not on the right path. Here God has dismissed (their pronouncements) in a number of ways...That is the reason that such wishing for death is not unlawful...Now understand that this criticism is intended towards the Jews of the time of the Prophet and not against Jews of all time...Second do not doubt that some of the Jews might have wished so and we did not hear that. Let it be known that the opponents of the Qur'an have always been more in number than its supporters. Had it occurred so, (the reports about them) should have reached us.⁹¹

Finally, Thānawī amplified the text by making the earlier opinions as recorded in the Muslim scholarly tradition look simple and easy. His treatment of part of verse Q 2:286 is a good example. The verse reads:

God does not burden any soul with more than it can bear: each gains whatever good it has done, and suffers its bad.

Thānawī engaged with the ideas related to this verse in the exegetical tradition and prophetic sayings. The main issue was how a believer could implement the teachings of the *sharī'ah* at minutest level in his life. Thānawī explained in the light what earlier opinions had said that the verse related to inner workings of the human mind that are uncontrollable. The verse also concerned the moral mistakes that are unintentionally perpetrated. Hence, it meant that God does not burden humans for these thoughts and actions. In order to make it more lucid for ordinary readers, Thānawī devised new theological explanations for a modern mind.⁹²

⁹¹ *TBQ*, vol. 1, 73.

⁹² *TBQ*, vol. 1, 209-210.

Colonial India and Thānawī's Qur'anic Hermeneutics

The Coherence of the Qur'an

While Thānawī was influenced to some extent by the prevailing atmosphere of non-Muslim critique of the Qur'an's style and structure, he was not directly engaging with his non-Muslim opponents, at least in writing; he did enter into inter-faith disputations, though. However, he seemed to be more concerned with the Qur'an becoming increasingly accessible to ordinary educated Muslims. Through his commentary, Thānawī was offering the Qur'an with a much-needed value addition by incorporating the *rabṭ* feature into his work. Thus, his drawing upon *rabṭ* for interpreting the Qur'an meant more for ordinary Muslim readers, and less for answering what non-Muslims were criticizing in relation to the Qur'an. Before him, Aḥmad Khān's commentary was devoid of this feature of *rabṭ* and Thānawī's own times were just beginning to see the emergence of Qur'an commentaries with this feature. The point is that Muslim work on the Qur'an's coherence in colonial India only emerged gradually and Thānawī was among the first generation of the modern scholars who addressed this issue. Thānawī's stress on *rabṭ* was not a part of any larger method to interpret the Qur'an on new lines, as for instance we will see in the case of Farāhī. Thānawī wanted to highlight something that already existed in the Qur'an but was hidden from its untrained readers.

As we discussed in Chapter Two and as will be clearer in the comparative study in Chapter Six, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fascination with the concepts of *naẓm* and *rabṭ* was widespread in Muslim scholarly circles, and Thānawī represented this hermeneutical tendency both for the subcontinent in general and for his own Deobandī

intellectual contemporaries and progeny in particular.⁹³ Thānawī's scanty but broad comments betrayed the atmosphere in which he was writing. He wrote in the beginning of his small book, *Sabq al-Ghāyāt fī Nasq al-Āyāt*, which dealt specifically with connections between different verses:

This small *risāla* deals with the inter-connection of Qur'anic verses, something we are in dire need of in these times. A major part of it borrows from *Tafsīr-i Kabīr* and *Tafsīr Abī Sa'ūd* but this humble author has added some of his own ideas into it as well.⁹⁴

On another occasion, Thānawī dealt with this question of *rabṭ bayna al-āyāt* publicly in his own times.⁹⁵ He criticized those who expected a *rabṭ* in the Qur'an along the lines of what one finds in a modern book. He tried to explain that it is only through a theological understanding of the Qur'an that one can unfold the hidden inter-connectedness of the divine discourses in the scripture. He hinted at this theological underpinning in the following words:

...The second question is that of why the Qur'an has this style. I would answer that its reason can only be clear to the one who knows the relationship between God and His worshipper and that relationship is none other than a personal love and affection.⁹⁶

Thānawī took an example of this affection in the context of a father teaching his son to elaborate the concept of coherence in the Qur'an. A father in the course of his instruction may distract from a topic and admonish his son for some wrong he commits while listening to his father. However, this distraction has no bearing on the coherence of his lesson as the son understands

⁹³ For instance, an important Deobandī exegete during the British times was Aḥmad °Alī Lāhorī (1887-1964) who wrote *Tafsīr Qur'ān-i °Azīz*. Another important work on these interpretive lines from Deoband circle was *Bulghat al-Ḥayrān fī Rabṭ Āyāt al-Furqān* by Ḥusayn °Alī (d. 1943), who was a student of Nānotwī and Gangohī.

⁹⁴ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Sabq al-Ghāyāt fī Nasq al-Āyāt* (Karachi: Mīr Muḥammad Kutub Khāna, n.d.), 1. Originally published in 1898.

⁹⁵ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Khuṭbāt-i Ḥakīm al-Ummat: Ḥaqīqat-i Taṣawwuf wa Taqwā*, ed. °Abd al-Raḥmān Khān, vol. 11 (Multan: Idāra-yi Tā'lifāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2007), 13-15.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 14.

the dynamic of fatherly love and care that binds his different sayings. In the same manner, hidden linkages in Qur'anic discourses can easily be discerned by the one who understands the divine love. Without a sense of the divine love, the reader may perceive breaks in the text.

The other historical reason for the need for a coherent Qur'an was the imagined crisis of disintegration of the Muslim community in the colonial context. We can understand Thānawī's idea of *rabṭ* within this evolving scenario. With the decline of the Mughal Empire, the Muslim intelligentsia was coming to grips with a new political and social world, at least in their perception. As we noted earlier, in the wake of disagreements in Muslim ranks on matters of religion, society, and politics, there was already a primitive movement in the offing to make the Qur'an a basis of unity of Muslim community as manifested in Walī Allāh's exhortation of *rajū' ilā al-Qur'ān*. Combined with these early social shifts around the Qur'an was the issue of imagining a singular meaning in contrast to the polyvalent meanings of Qur'anic verses. Qur'anic exegesis since the nineteenth century in colonial India often betrayed a desire on the part of Muslim exegetes to somehow develop a method to settle disputes on the multiplicity of its meaning as perceived in the pre-modern *tafsīr*. This process evolved gradually and became one of the conspicuous trends in Qur'anic hermeneutics in the early twentieth century. Thānawī was different in his approach to understanding the Qur'an in terms of a singular meaning but he was certainly on the same continuum on which, as we will see in Chapter Five and Six, Farāhī was an extreme. Moreover, the issue of the historicity of the text of the Qur'an had a direct bearing on the nature of the *naẓm* a particular exegete conceived. Any view on the early collection of the Qur'an was bound to have an effect on one's understanding of its structure and its coherence. If, to an exegete like Walī Allāh, the scripture was a collection of disparate religious discourses or divine speeches recorded in different suras, there was no need to imagine

a coherence like the one expected in a modern book. But if the Qur'an was believed to be arranged in a systematic manner, Muslim exegetes could think of a *nazm* in it. Against this background, Thānawī did not develop this view of Qur'an's smooth flow of ideas as a grand project to rethink the Qur'an's structure in terms of its collection. For him, it sufficed to view the Qur'an either as a set of independent suras or as an intelligently arranged text. But there was no need, in his opinion, to revisit the Qur'an's structure and arrangement, or to read it as a modern book. All he wanted to offer his readers was an easy-to-read text with the hints he provided at making inter-connections between verses. This is the very reason that he was inclined to use the exegetical works of al-Mahā'imī, Abū Sa'ūd, and al-Ālūsī. All of these works had been apparently written more on the lines of linear *nazm* and less on total *nazm*. By contrast, as we will study, Farāhī's work was a comprehensive program to rethink the structure and style of the Qur'an, and this view had repercussions for the interpretation of the Qur'an that could be perceived by his opponents as unconventional.

The Pre-Modern Tafsīr and Issues of Religious Authority

Thānawī's commitment to the larger Sunni exegetical tradition, as evidenced in his elaborating the text on the semantic canvas of the tradition, can be explained in a number of ways if we focus on the broad historical context of his life and times. To root his *tafsīr* in the Muslim scholarly tradition remained his primary concern as his principles of interpretation clearly manifested. By studying his oeuvre dealing with the Qur'an, it appears that this commitment to adhere to the exegetical tradition was owing to the crisis of religious authority in matters of religion in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century British India. One must note that his *tafsīr* is not the actual site that manifests this crisis. It is his other writings dealing with issues of

interpreting the Qur'an that betray the strategies he pursued in order to construct this authority, particularly from the standpoint of the Deobandī and Sufi orientations.

It appears that there were three larger challenges that Thānawī was confronting. First, there were writings about the Qur'an coming from the pen of those who were perceived by traditionalist Muslim scholars either as following the West, as having been educated in English-taught institutions, or as somewhat following the precedents in line with Mu[°]tazilī thinking in matters of exegesis and theology. Second, the very issue of how to understand the Qur'an was at stake for Thānawī in a milieu which was providing many opportunities, through the availability of print technology, to bring issues of Qur'anic interpretation into the public sphere. Third, the context of inter-school polemics that had triggered competing ideas from other traditionalists and what Thānawī considered "heretical" schools of thought was another framework within which he developed his exegetical positions on the Qur'an, in order to assert Deoband's authority as a "custodian" of the Muslim religious tradition. We can make sense of Thānawī's different non-commentarial writings about the Qur'an from these three contexts: criticism of modernist writings; the growth of a public sphere which motivated new translations of the Qur'an; and inter-school polemics.

In the first regard, it was especially Aḥmad Khān who had to bear the brunt of Thānawī's criticism.⁹⁷ In his short epistle *Iṣlāḥ-i Tafsīr-i Sir Sayyid* and other related writings where he discussed his imagined school of *nēchariyya*, Thānawī explained that the real purpose of his

⁹⁷ Ashraf [°]Alī Thānawī, "Sir Sayyid awr un kē Muttabi[°]in kā Ḥukm," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī[°], vol. 6 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-[°]Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 168-170; Ashraf [°]Alī Thānawī, "Aqwāl wa [°]Aqā[°]id-i Firqa Muḥadditha Nēchariyya," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī[°], vol. 6 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-[°]Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 170-185; Ashraf [°]Alī Thānawī, "Risālat al-Namūdhaj min Mu[°]taqidāt ba[°]ḍ Ahl al-[°]Iwaj ma[°]hu Jadwal Mu[°]taqidāt," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, Muftī Muḥammad Shafī[°], vol. 6 (Karachi: Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-[°]Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 270-309. Ashraf [°]Alī Thānawī, "Tafsīr Sūrat al-Nisā[°]," in *Ashraf al-Tafāsīr*, ed. Muḥammad Iqbāl Qurayshī, vol. 2 (Multan: Idāra-yi Tā[°]lifāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2004), 5-6. His *fatāwā* were originally published in 1927. Later editions incorporated further additions in the corpus.

writing was to protect Muslims from wrong beliefs. In his opinion, Aḥmad Khān's *tafsīr* deviated from the "established" path of the earlier generations of Muslim scholars. He made note of all the themes on which Aḥmad Khān had been criticized by his opponents. These themes included but were not limited to: Aḥmad Khān's denying the impact of asking from God (*inkār tā³thīr-i du^cā*), a topic Aḥmad Khān discussed in his commentary of Q 1;⁹⁸ his denying the nature of such phenomena as prophethood, *samāwāt* ("skies"), angels, and Satan; the conversation that occurred between Allāh and angels in the Creation story; the gushing of twelve fountains as mentioned in the Qur'an and the Bible regarding the story of the Israelites; miracles as the proof of *nabuwwa*; and the principle of *naskh*. In addition, Thānawī disagreed with Aḥmad Khān on the latter's "strange" understanding of the *dīya* ("blood money") law and his opinion that a healthy person can pay compensation for not keeping fast.⁹⁹

Thānawī also took issue with Aḥmad Khān and his supposed camp (comprised of Muḥsin al-Mulk and Chirāgh °Alī¹⁰⁰) in many of his short writings. He expressed his intention to write a thorough rebuttal of his exegetical and philosophical arguments but only ended up stating some broad directions for a work he promised but never produced. He also recommended Muḥammad °Alī Bichrāyūnī's three-volume work that offered a detailed critical analysis of

⁹⁸ See chap. 3, n. 25.

⁹⁹ The related Qur'anic verse is Q 4:92: "Never should a believer kill another believer, except by mistake. If anyone kills a believer by mistake he must free one Muslim slave and pay compensation to the victim's relatives, unless they charitably forgo it; if the victim belonged to a people at war with you but is a believer, then the compensation is only to free a believing slave; if he belonged to a people with whom you have a treaty, then compensation should be handed over to his relatives, and a believing slave set free. Anyone who lacks the means to do this must fast for two consecutive months by way of repentance to God: God is all knowing, all wise."

¹⁰⁰ Chirāgh °Alī (d. 1895) was one of the key associates of Aḥmad Khan and a civil servant in the princely state of Hyderabad. He is routinely characterized as a modernist and is seen as reinterpreting the Qur'an for his understanding of the doctrine of *jihād* in Islam. For a basic introduction to his thought, see Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism*, 57-63.

Aḥmad Khān’s exegetical ideas.¹⁰¹ Taken together, all his arguments against Aḥmad Khān clearly revealed his underlying motive to defend his idea of authority as based upon the “established” tradition of Qur’anic exegesis and other Muslim scholarly traditional resources. His main argument was that Aḥmad Khān’s position ran counter to the *ijmā’*^c (“consensus”) of the *umma* (“Muslim nation”) and thus, his arguments did not stand up in the light of either clear verses of the Qur’an, the authentic traditions of the Prophet, or established understandings among the *‘ulamā’*.

The important issue of the translation of the Qur’an was very much in the air at this time.¹⁰² In this regard, the Qur’an’s Urdu translation by a famous Urdu fiction writer and an associate of Aḥmad Khān, Nadhīr Aḥmad gained quite a lot of attention. Thānawī already mentioned dismissing such “poor” translations of the Qur’an as the main motivation behind writing his commentary. He specifically criticized Nadhīr Aḥmad, whose translation was otherwise attracting considerable readership, for the latter’s careless use of Urdu idiom, which changed the meaning and misstated the purpose of Qur’anic verses.¹⁰³ For instance, in the case of the verses related to *ṣawm* (‘fasting’), Thānawī’s main discussion centred on the specific meaning that Nadhīr Aḥmad’s Urdu translation conveyed. Nadhīr Aḥmad’s translation, in his opinion, did not recognize the abrogation of this particular verse, which we noted earlier when

¹⁰¹ Thānawī cites the work, Muḥammad ‘Alī Bichrāyūnī, *Kitāb al-Burhān ‘alā Tajhīl man Qāla bi-ghayrin ‘Ilm fī al-Qur’ān*, 3 vols. (Murādābād: Anjuman-i Islāmiyya Gulzār Ibrāhīm, n.d.). See Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī, *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, vol. 6 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-‘Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 281.

¹⁰² Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī, “Sharāiṭ-i Jawāz-i Ta‘līm Tarjama-yi Qur’ān-i Majīd ma‘ Aqwāl ‘Ulamā’ Mutanad Hind,” in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī‘, vol. 4 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-‘Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 79-85.

¹⁰³ Thānawī, *Iṣlāḥ-i Tarjama-yi Dihliwiyya*.

considering Thānawī's understanding of the *naskh* principle. Similarly, on another occasion, in the case of the verse Q 7:32,¹⁰⁴ Thānawī wrote:

Here [the use of] these ornamental things [in Nadhīr Aḥmad's translation] needed to be explained to indicate those [things] which are lawful and those which are not, otherwise ignorant young people will follow it in their own manner, for example, on things like [the permissibility] of gold and silk for men.

Thānawī then wrote a letter to Nadhīr Aḥmad inquiring about certain issues, but he received no answer. He then revisited his translation and focused on those elements which had a clear bearing on beliefs and legal matters. On a number of points, Thānawī mentioned Nadhīr Aḥmad's mistakes, particularly in cases where a simple reading failed to capture the complexity of a theological or legal issue. Thānawī objected that in an effort to create an aesthetically smooth Urdu expression and idiom of Delhi, Nadhīr Aḥmad had tampered with the signified and intended meaning of the Qur'an. In addition, he stressed the desirability of following the Ḥanafī school's legal injunctions and asked Nadhīr Aḥmad to consider this school because the majority of Muslim population in India belonged to it.

Apart from Nadhīr Aḥmad, Thānawī raised his serious concerns with the "faulty" translation of the Qur'an by another notable contemporary journalist, Mirzā Ḥayrat Dihlawī.¹⁰⁵ In the beginning, he wrote a letter to Ḥayrat Dihlawī highlighting some of the wrong exegetical glosses in the footnotes to his translation. Upon that criticism, Ḥayrat Dihlawī replied that as long as his Urdu translation was correct, he did not consider it worthwhile to discuss "minor" issues of footnotes. Later Thānawī in a separate epistle wrote a detailed dismissal of Ḥayrat

¹⁰⁴ "Say [Prophet], 'Who has forbidden the adornment and the nourishment God has provided for His servants?' Say, 'They are [allowed] for those who believe during the life of this world: they will be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection.' This is how We make Our revelation clear for those who understand."

¹⁰⁵ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Iṣlāḥ-i Tarjama-yi Mirzā Ḥayrat* (Kanpur: Maṭba° Qayyūmī, n.d.). For Ḥayrat Dihlawī's Qur'an translation, see Mirzā Ḥayrat Dihlawī, *Qur°ān-i Majīd Mutarjam ma° Tafsīr* (Delhi: Curzon Press, 1901).

Dihlāwī's whole translation. The predominant thrust of the criticism was his taking issue with the translator's method of rendering Arabic sentences and phrases into Urdu. On one occasion, he highlighted that Ḥayrat Dihlawī had translated an Arabic expression that employed *al-fi'l al-majhūl al-muta'addī* ("passive tense in transitive mode") into an Urdu expression that employed *al-fi'l al-ma'rūf al-lāzim* ("active tense in intransitive mode"). On another instance, Thānawī pointed out the mistake of making an *al-jumla al-fi'liyya* ("sentence employing verb") in Arabic into an *al-jumla al-ismiyya* ("sentence employing noun") in Urdu. In Thānawī's opinion, the end result of such a flawed translation and footnotes was a change in the intended meaning of the Qur'an.

In another short treatise, Thānawī engaged with other scholars, most notably °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī, for their "wrong" interpretations, particularly their use of *al-°ilm al-i°tibārī* ("moral intervention through one's subjectivity").¹⁰⁶ He debated with Sindhī on his understanding of the *naskh* principle. Sindhī apparently dismissed the *naskh* of an earlier verse by a verse revealed later, particularly in the case of the inheritance verse in the Qur'an.¹⁰⁷ Earlier Sindhī had written that, in the light of his personal circumstances, it made sense to him to keep the verse, traditionally understood as abrogated, as still valid. On another occasion, Thānawī differed with Sindhī in explaining a Qur'anic verse from an economic principle. Thānawī argued that the real focus of the Qur'an was not economic matters per se but rather how we should morally pursue economic matters and how such issues were related to correct beliefs and legal

¹⁰⁶ °Abd al-Qādir Āzād, "Thānawī Baḥaythiyat-i Mufassir," 299-315. Thānawī was urging on Sindhī not to employ his own subjective positions to the text of the Qur'an.

¹⁰⁷ The verse Sindhī was referring to was: Q 2: 180: "When death approaches one of you who leaves wealth, it is prescribed that he should make a proper bequest to parents and close relatives—a duty incumbent on those who are mindful of God. The verse was deemed as abrogated by some later verses and Sindhī wanted the abrogated verse intact considering his mother's example."

rulings. From all this it clearly appeared that Thānawī did not want a free interpretation of the Qur'an.

In a similar vein, Thānawī criticized the emergence of poetical translations of the Qur'an that had been appearing in the print since the early half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁸ In replying to someone's question about whether it was lawful to translate the Qur'an into a poetical form, such as that of Urdu poetry, Thānawī began by critiquing one such translation that he believed came from the pen of one of Nadhīr Aḥmad's admirers.¹⁰⁹ Thānawī highlighted the mismatching of the translation in comparison to the Qur'anic text and opined, in the end, that any poetical rendering of the Qur'an would be susceptible to introduce additions or deletions into the standard text, given the constraints of poetical form which needs strict adherence to meter.

Thānawī also penned a small treatise in response to a Muslim government official from the Punjab who was concerned with the spread of Aḥmadī ideas. The inquirer wanted Thānawī to answer the key claims to prophethood by Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad of the "heretical" Ahmadiyya Movement.¹¹⁰ These claims were based on the interpretation of Qur'anic verses like the meaning of *rabwā* ("peaceful hillside") in Q 23:50¹¹¹ in which Ghulām Aḥmad saw himself as the messiah and *mahdī* foretold in the scripture. Similarly, Thānawī disputed with other Muslim writers on the meaning of *mutawaffika* ("take you back") in Q 3:55 with reference to the death of

¹⁰⁸ Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 158.

¹⁰⁹ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Tarjama-yi Qur'ān dar Naẓm," in *Bawādir al-Nawādir*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī°, vol. 1 (Lahore: Idāra-yi Islāmiyyāt, 1985), 313-316; Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Taḥqīq-i Tarjama-yi Qur'ān-i Majīd dar Naẓm," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī°, vol. 4 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-°Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 51-55.

¹¹⁰ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Al-Khiṭāb al-Malīḥ fī Taḥqīq al-Mahdī wa al-Masīḥ* (Sādūrah, Anbāla: Maṭba° Bilālī, n.d.); Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Mirzā Qādiyānī kā 'wa law Taqūl °alaynā ba°ḍ al-Aqāyal' sē Istidlāl Bāṭil hay," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī°, vol. 6 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-°Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 269-270.

¹¹¹ The related verse is: Q 23:50: "We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign; We gave them shelter on a peaceful hillside [*rabwā*] with flowing water. Ghulām Aḥmad was reading some of the Qur'anic vocabulary as an evidence for his claim to prophethood."

Jesus and his ascension to heavens,¹¹² issues on which Thānawī, in his perception or claim, was strictly committed to traditional explanations and thus, amplified the text for ordinary readers.

Apart from his censure of the Aḥmadīs, Thānawī's writings on a number of occasions were responses to new interpretations by those who claimed to be the representatives of authentic Islam. He received a letter from someone in Lahore who informed him of a new situation in the city where a new intellectual was spreading interpretations of *al-ghayb* ("the unseen") that differed from "received" explanations.¹¹³ The letter writer complained that the intellectual had been disseminating these ideas in the name of Deoband, and this had led other religious groups such as the Barēlwīs to criticize Thānawī's school of thought. Thānawī wrote a thorough rebuttal of this position by employing points from the traditional exegesis and also by articulating further theological explanations. Thānawī also wrote a detailed dismissal of a new work on the Qur'an entitled, *Tafṣīl al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* in 1931 whose author had arranged the Qur'anic verses thematically in order to enable ordinary readers to understand the Qur'an's message by themselves, without the aid of trained members of the *'ulamā'*.¹¹⁴

On other occasions, Thānawī's writings and responses on matters of Qur'anic interpretation betrayed other features of the contemporary sectarian intellectual atmosphere. The journal *Ahl-i Ḥadīth* had published an article in 1937 that characterized a certain usage in the

¹¹² The debate in colonial India was on the issue of the interpretation of the Qur'anic word, which is either understood as referring to the death of Jesus or lifting him alive to the heavens by God, only to come again near the end of time. The verse reads "God said, 'Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me: I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the Day of Resurrection I will make those who follow you superior to those who disbelieved. Then you will all return to Me and I will judge between you regarding your differences.'"

¹¹³ Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, "Risāla Shaqq al-Jīb 'an Ḥaqq al-Ghayb," in *Bawādir al-Nawādir* ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī', vol. 2 (Lahore: Idāra-yi Islāmiyyāt, 1985), 741-771.

¹¹⁴ Ashraf 'Alī Thānawī, "Risāla al-Hādī li-l-Ḥayrān fī Wādī Tafṣīl al-Bayān," in *Imdād al-Fatāwā*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī', vol. 6 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-'Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 222-225.

Qur'an as meant only for *saj'* ("rhymed prose") and as having no other significance.¹¹⁵ This journal featured a special section where it would publish contrasting views, a format meant only to encourage scholarly discussions. The editor judged this article on *saj'* to have simply made an academic mistake and not something to be condemned as *kuf'r* ("disbelief") or *fisq* ("disobedience" or "immorality"). On this, Thānawī and others (such as commentators in the journal *Muḥammadī*) reacted not only that such positions were inclined towards atheism and *nēchariyya*, but that they also ran counter to the views of the consensus of the *umma* over the *i'jāz* of the Qur'an. In a similar fashion, Thānawī rejected new interpretations of Yājūj and Mājūj,¹¹⁶ two proper names in the Qur'an, because they contradicted the majority's opinion in the Muslim tradition. He wrote:

In the article "Europe and Islam" in the newspaper *Sach* on 6 August 1928, the word *dajjāl* ("Anti-Christ") and the words Yājūj and Mājūj have been interpreted in a manner different from its established meanings. Interpreting texts for their evident meaning is both a logical and traditionally accepted method, otherwise we cannot make sense of texts and laws. However, if any textual or logical evidence gives us a different meaning, this too is acceptable. But we cannot accept new interpretations [simply] on the basis of the whims and tastes of a reader because, if this is accepted, then every interpretation of every *heretical* group deviating from the Qur'an and Ḥadīth would be valid [emphasis added].¹¹⁷

Exegetical Amplifications and the Lay Muslim Reader

The case of Thānawī's exegetical amplifications, that is, his extended exegetical elaborations, on the text of the Qur'an betray the fractious historical milieu that was shaping

¹¹⁵ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Badī'a Risāla Malāḥat al-Bayān fī Faṣāḥat al-Qur'ān dar Tanzīh Qur'ān-i Majīd az Ghayr Ansab," in *Al-Badā'ī'*, ed. Jamīl Aḥmad Thānawī (Lahore: Kutub Khāna Jamīlī, n.d.), 510-522.

¹¹⁶ These are references to the names mentioned in the Bible and the Qur'an. There is a debate on what actually the names signified to – whether certain people or individuals. The Qur'anic reference is Q 18:94-95: "They said, 'Dhu 'l-Qarnayn, Gog and Magog are ruining this land. Will you build a barrier between them and us if we pay you a tribute?' 95 He answered, 'The power my Lord has given me is better than any tribute, but if you lend me your strength, I will put up a fortification between you and them.'"

¹¹⁷ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Radd Tā'wīl Lafẓ Yājūj o Mājūj Khilāf Jamhūr," in *Bawādir al-Nawādir* ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī°, vol. 2 (Lahore: Idāra-yi Islāmiyyāt, 1985), 374-375.

these interpretations, which he primarily meant for the laity in order to save them from prevailing threats posed by “heretical” and “unorthodox” voices among Muslims in British India. There were many historical contexts in which debates on the interpretation of the Qur’an were widespread, and the traditionalist scholars like Thānawī were expected to respond in order to preserve “orthodox” Islam. Some of the debates in these contexts included, but were not limited to, those concerning the nature of the Qur’an, gender paradigms, and theological, including cosmological, issues. In this regard, a collection of Thānawī’s utterances, *Ashraf al-Bayān fī ‘Ulūm al-Ḥadīth wa al-Qur’ān*,¹¹⁸ encapsulated the intellectual spirit of those times, in which he felt obliged to offer his extended exegetical explanations. The editor reminded the reader of the Prophet’s famous saying that there will always remain a group in his *umma* who will stand on the truth. He offered this collection as an absolute necessity in these times. Another good resource that gives readers an idea of his intellectual milieu is the anthology of Thānawī’s rare *fatāwā* and essays entitled *Bawādir al-Nawādir*, which deals with various aspects of Qur’anic interpretation and matters of understanding Ḥadīth and *fiqh*. These and other writings offer us insight into some of the historical background that provided the impetus to Thānawī’s elaboration of particular verses at length, beyond their traditionally understood meaning. For instance, he explained in detail what he held was meant by *mutashābih* in the Qur’an in response to a letter that had been written due to the debates the letter writer had confronted in his town.¹¹⁹ Thānawī, based on the conventional meaning of the term in *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* works, amplified the meaning of the word by linguistically constructing more sub-types of *mutashābih* for the understanding of the writer. Similarly, Thānawī would not always deal with the gender issues of

¹¹⁸ Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī, *Ashraf al-Bayān fī ‘Ulūm al-Ḥadīth wa al-Qur’ān* (Sahāranpūr: Kutub Khāna Imdād al-Ghurabā’, n.d.).

¹¹⁹ Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī, “Risālat al-Tawājih bimā Yata‘alaq bi-l-Tashābih,” in *Bawādir al-Nawādir*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī‘, vol. 2 (Karachi: Maktaba Dār al-‘Ulūm Karachi, 2010), 752-760.

his day in detail in his *tafsīr* and would instead only lay out the traditional interpretation of the related verses. However, certain other writings of his¹²⁰ did depict the historical milieu in which he had to gloss such verses in more depth. In replying to a query that came from the opponents of women's veiling in British India, he elaborated in detail what was actually meant by *al-zīna* ("adornment") in the Qur'an¹²¹ and condemned new interpretations emerging in the public sphere.

In matters of cosmology mentioned in the Qur'an, Thānawī was criticized for his exegesis of Q 7:4,¹²² for his reading being against the *jamhūr* ("majority") opinion. On this, he penned a long rebuttal of this criticism and amplified the verses to prove that his explanation was in line with conventional understanding.¹²³ On another occasion, disapprovingly hinting at modernist elements in colonial India, he severely censured Muslims who subscribed to the view that following religions other than Islam could lead to salvation in the hereafter. On this point, he offered his creative explanations of some twenty Qur'anic verses in order to prove the weakness of this theological position.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Ilqā' al-Sakīna fī Taḥqīq Ibdā' al-Zīna* (Deoband: Dār al-Ishā'at, n.d.).

¹²¹ The reference is to Q 24:31: "And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves fall to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their womenfolk, their slaves, such men as attend them who have no sexual desire, or children who are not yet aware of women's nakedness". Another verse related to dressing that Thānawī discussed was: Q 7: 31: "Children of Adam, dress well whenever you are at worship, and eat and drink [as We have permitted] but do not be extravagant: God does not like extravagant people."

¹²² Q 7:54: "Your Lord is God, who created the heavens and earth in six Days, then established Himself on the throne; He makes the night cover the day in swift pursuit; He created the sun, moon, and stars to be subservient to His command; all creation and command belong to Him. Exalted be God, Lord of all the worlds!"

¹²³ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, "Risāla Tamhīd al-Farsh fī Taḥdīd al-°Arsh," in *Bawādir al-Nawādir*, ed. Muftī Muḥammad Shafī°, vol. 2 (Lahore: Idāra-yi Islāmiyyat, 1985), 601-632.

¹²⁴ Ashraf °Alī Thānawī, *Tawḥīd al-Ḥaqq*, Handwritten manuscript copy, dated Rajab 1358 AH/ca. 1940 CE, 31 pages, Library of Jāmi°a Dār al-°Ulūm, Karachi, Pakistan.

In short, Thānawī's added explanations of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses were meant to serve specific needs of his audiences including the larger Muslim public. He neither wanted nor felt any need at all to follow a path that could be perceived as non-traditionalist, that is, something seen as heretical by others. For him, the way the Qur'an had been understood in the past by Muslim majority opinion was sufficient for modern audiences if they reflected on it under his guidance.

The Impact of Thānawī's Qur'an Project

Thānawī's Qur'an project had a considerable impact in his own day and beyond. His biographer reported the popularity of his commentary in his times.¹²⁵ Moreover, his devotees like °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī (1892-1977), the philosopher, journalist, and Qur'an's exegete, wrote their observations regarding the success of Thānawī's commentary.¹²⁶ The influence of Thānawī's exegetical opinions is amply attested in his *fatāwā* collections that portrayed a picture of Muslim believers from different locations in colonial India inquiring of him on matters related to the understanding of the Qur'an. The matters, on which his opinions were sought, included contrasting opinions emanating from other schools of thought, such as the Barēlwīs, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, and also from individual scholars such as admirers of Aḥmad Khān. The questions put to him also pertained to positions taken on the Qur'an by Christian missionaries and by lay Muslims. These question also concerned the new sub-genres of Qur'an translation such as poetic renderings of the scripture into Urdu.

In addition, the history of the Deobandī tradition of Qur'anic scholarship attests to Thānawī's influence in three ways. First, Thānawī's immediate students took up some of the

¹²⁵ Dissemination of Thānawī's works was also facilitated by the publishing house, *Maṭba' Ashraf al-Maṭābi'*, whose owners, apart from being his relatives, also subscribed to his ideas and the larger Deobandī orientation.

¹²⁶ °Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī, *Tafsīr-i Mājidī* (Lahore: Tāj Company, 1954). Originally published in 1944.

tasks left unfinished by their mentor. His nephew and student, Zafar Aḥmad °Uthmānī wrote an exegesis, *Aḥkām al-Qurʿān*, of legal rulings mentioned in the Qurʿan based on Thānawī’s exegetical inputs (*afādāt*). Later, Muḥammad Shafī°, his student and the founder of Deoband’s influential branch in Pakistan, the Dār al-°Ulūm in Karachi, penned an influential multi-volume Urdu Qurʿan commentary in order to make his mentor’s work more accessible.¹²⁷ In addition to Thānawī’s influence in Deoband’s circles, his *tafsīr* was also acknowledged as the basis of other exegetical works within colonial India. Daryābādī highlighted Thānawī’s *Bayān al-Qurʿān* as the basis of his Qurʿan commentary, which gained a considerable reception in the post-independence period. He explained that his own input should only be seen as making Thānawī’s language and interpretation easier to understand. Thānawī’s work also permeated into the later anthologies of Urdu *tafsīr* works which were meant to enable readers to compare and contrast different exegetical opinions.¹²⁸ In short, Thānawī’s project, in the fragmented world of Muslim religious ideas, was a milestone in generating the perception of a link between an imagined “unified” Muslim scholarly past and the Muslim present. In other words, Thānawī significantly contributed to facing the challenge of “Protestant Islam” in the wake of the rise of print technology as conceptualized by Robinson.¹²⁹ Through the institutional platform of Deoband, his image was presented as of *the* “custodian” of a long, orthodox Muslim exegetical tradition, in contrast to the “heretical” interventions by figures such as Aḥmad Khān.

¹²⁷ For an academic work on Shafī°, see Mustansir Mir, “The Urdu Qurʿanic Commentary of Muhammad Shafī° (d. 1976): Ma°arif al-Qurʿān,” in *The Qurʿan and its Readers Worldwide*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Oxford University Press & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), 195-216.

¹²⁸ See °Abd al-Qayyūm, ed., *Guldasta-yi Tafāsīr*, 7 vols. (Multan: Idāra-yi Tā°lifāt-i Ashrafiyya, 2007).

¹²⁹ See chap. 2, 95.

Chapter Five

Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (1863-1930) A Quest for a New Methodology

In an intellectual atmosphere charged with communal politics, Muslim reform, and inter-school rivalries spearheaded by eminent religious scholars, a somewhat obscure figure of Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī (1863-1930) carved a special place for himself in the history of the evolution of ideas around the Qur'an in British India. Tutored in seclusion in the early phases of his life, nurtured later in institutions of public education, a focused, yet not a radical, teacher in the Islamic sciences by profession, and a scholar who eventually retired to his dormitory in a small *qaṣba* town, Farāhī remains an enigmatic character for an intellectual historian, not least for his being relatively less known in the history of the *‘ulamā’* in South Asia. Despite his lack of visible activism, he gained a widespread favourable reception in his contemporary intellectual circles and exercised considerable impact that transcended beyond the era of British India.

Before we investigate Farāhī's career and work, briefly acquainting ourselves at this point with his legacy and influence can enable us to see his place within South Asian Qur'anic scholarship. The earlier answers to the question of his legacy and impact have mostly been shaped by his students and admirers whose works offer us a blend of their admiration for Farāhī's scholarly credentials and their recognizing some key features of his work on the Qur'an. We can assess his influence in three ways. First, during his lifetime, a visible recognition of Farāhī was made by all factions of the *‘ulamā’*, intellectuals, and young students, including well-known names of the period such as Abū al-Kalām Āzād (1888-1956), Abū al-A[°]lā Mawdūdī (1903-1979), and [°]Ubayd Allāh Sindhī (1872-1944). It would require for more space than is available here to consider how exactly his peers and seniors perceived him. It seems that

most of his admirers recognized him as an expert on the Qur'an, however, and would consult him for matters dealing with Qur'anic interpretation and Arabic literature despite the fact they themselves were the authors of *tafsīr* works. This was, for instance, the case with Abū al-Kalām Āzād who was eager to catch Farāhī during his short visit to Calcutta, as reported by Farāhī's biographer. It may be because others were placing their exegetical works in the larger context of their political and social movements, whereas Farāhī was interested in a strict academic and seemingly secular approach to the Qur'an, as will be discussed below. Second, Farāhī's influence extended to the next two generation of scholars, most visibly in the shape of the works of Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (1904-1997), a student of Farāhī at the Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ in Azamgarh,¹ and Jāwēd Aḥmad Ghāmidī (b. 1951),² a student of Iṣlāḥī after the partition of India. Both of them further developed Farāhī's principles of exegesis and wrote Qur'an commentaries, apart from contributing in other fields of Islamic studies based on his directions. Moreover, both of them exerted considerable influence as religious scholars in Pakistan and beyond, through the program of Muslim revival based on their understanding of the Qur'an. Current opinion sees the three scholars and others who are inclined towards Farāhī's approach as the Farāhī school, which is usually seen as a modernist school of thought.³ Third, at a deeper level, the earlier two reasons

¹ Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī was a well-known exegete of the Qur'an who further developed Farāhī's principles of interpretation and wrote a nine-volume commentary on the Qur'an. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, 9 vols. (Lahore: Farān Foundation, 1983). Iṣlāḥī has also gained considerable attention in the modern academic work on the Qur'an. See, Mir, *Coherence in the Qur'ān*. While elaborating Iṣlāḥī's method, Mir discussed at length the work of Farāhī as well.

² Ghāmidī's work has also attracted quite an attention in his home country and also in the academic world. For his work dealing with *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, see Jāwēd Aḥmad Ghāmidī, *Uṣūl o Mabādī* (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2010). For his work in progress on writing a full commentary of the Qur'an, see Jāwēd Aḥmad Ghāmidī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān* (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2009).

³ For having an orientation with this school and its members (Farāhī, Iṣlāḥī, and Ghāmidī), see Farhad Shafti, "A Comparative Analysis of the Farāhī School of Thought: A Case Study Approach" (PhD. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2016); Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (London & New York: Routledge, 2011), 84-88; Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis." On Ghāmidī, see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Islamic Modernism, Ethics, and Shari'ah in Pakistan," in *Shari'ah Law and Modern Muslim Ethics*, ed. Robert Hefner (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 177-202.

stemmed from Farāhī's work on the subject of *naẓm* of the Qur'an. As discussed earlier and will be dealt with in more detail in this chapter, the ideas of the inter-connectedness of Qur'anic verses (*rabṭ bayn al-āyāt*) and Qur'anic coherence were already in the air of colonial India in the wake of European criticism and missionary polemics. But what was missing in this scene was a more sophisticated literary theory or a larger project of *naẓm* that could give modern Muslim readers of the Qur'an some kind of hope that, in a milieu of Christian-Muslim intellectual strife and the crisis of religious authority among Muslims, they had a divine book in their hands that was relevant to their times and had a singular meaning to solve religious disputes. In this heavily charged milieu, Farāhī emerged not only with his new conception of *naẓm* but with a comprehensive program of restructuring the Islamic sciences by making the Qur'an the pivot. In this restructuring project, the Qur'an was the focal point around which a reformed Muslim society was imagined by Farāhī.

Farāhī's Intellectual Formation

While Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī are well known in the academic literature on modern Islam in South Asia, supplying a detailed knowledge and the context of Farāhī's life is important for the purposes of this chapter. It will help us see the factors that influenced his thought, the climax of which was his proclaimed discovery of *naẓm* in the Qur'an. Moreover, it will help us in many ways to compare and contrast the types of Muslim scholarship that were evolving since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Before we directly study Farāhī's life and works, it will be pertinent to make a few initial remarks on the sources we have about his life. He did not write a full autobiography,⁴ and we

⁴ He wrote a small autobiographical note for the Moroccan scholar, Taqī al-Dīn al-Hilālī (1893-1987). See Sharfuddīn Iṣlāḥī, *Dhikr-i Farāhī* (Lahore: Dār al-Tadhkīr, 2002), 32-33.

have only a few documents that throw light on his career. Therefore, for any biographer of Farāhī, the usual task is to glean from a disparate mass of materials important happenings of his life. The current chapter draws upon a detailed biographical work, *Dhikr-i Farāhī* by Sharfuddīn Iṣlāhī,⁵ who was a student at the religious seminary Madrasat al-Iṣlāh, whose leadership Farāhī assumed in 1919.⁶ His work is based on his oral history project and also on the archives of Farāhī's documents residing at the Madrasat al-Iṣlāh and with its administrators. Sharfuddīn's approach is strictly historical, and he is inquisitive to know what actually happened in the life of Farāhī. He is even critical of the verbal narratives about Farāhī's life of even his such staunch followers as Iṣlāhī. He has attempted to uncover as much documentary evidence as possible about his early life, educational endeavours, practical career, and leadership of the religious seminary. Apart from this work, we have nearly all the scholarly writings of Farāhī's preserved, in both manuscript and printed form, from which we can assess the extent of his work and creativity, and some of the influences he had on the later generations of Muslim scholars. In a relevant section of this chapter, we will focus more closely on his seminal *Fātiḥa* or *Muqaddima* ("introduction") to his exegesis of the selected chapters of the Qur'an and will attempt to seek explanation of what led him to his key ideas on the Qur'an.

⁵ Here I will use the spelling "Sharfuddīn" as a special case of transliteration. The surname "Iṣlāhī" is used in the dissertation the most famous student of Farāhī, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī. Moreover, we have many "Iṣlāhīs" in the literature on Farāhī because of their relationship with Madrasat al-Iṣlāh, Azamgarh.

⁶ This voluminous published biography is based on the doctoral dissertation of the author at the Institute of Islamic Research, International Islamic University, Islamabad. Sharfuddīn has discovered a wealth of documents pertaining to the institutions in which Farāhī studied and the organizations in which he worked apart from numerous personal interviews and pieces of communication. All these sources throw light on Farāhī's formation as an intellectual and his later career. We can also get further details about Farāhī from Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *Ḥayat-i Shiblī* (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifīn, 1993). Originally published ca. 1943; Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, *Yād-i Raftagān* (Karachi: Majlis-i Nashriyāt-i Islām, n.d.). Originally published ca. 1954; Shiblī Nu'c mānī, *Makātīb-i Shiblī*, ed. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, 2 vols. (Azamgarh: Maṭba'c-yi Ma'ārif, 1928). For a comprehensive bibliography on Farāhī, see Ṣafar al-Islām Iṣlāhī, *Kitābiyāt-i Farāhī* (Aligarh: Idāra-yi 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān, 1991).

Belonging to the *ashraf* class in the Indian Muslim social system, Farāhī was born to a Shaykh family in a village called Phrēhā⁷ in the famous district of Azamgarh in the United Provinces. Azamgarh district and its surroundings presented a scene of Muslim religious fervour and was the breeding ground of many intellectuals such as Shiblī Nu°mānī (d. 1914), who was the elder cousin and teacher of Farāhī, and one of the founders of the well-known seminary, Nadwat al-°Ulamā° in Lucknow, established in 1894. Farāhī's elders were mostly traditionally educated in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic, and several of them were involved in legal professions in colonial India. Except for Nu°mānī, who was an established luminary of the time, we do not find any scholar of notable standing in his family till the formation of Farāhī himself as an intellectual. Seeing the specific atmosphere in which Farāhī grew up, there was nothing substantially different from others that could have shaped his personality. He shared with others the common religious environment available to all. By the time Farāhī reached his teens, the Deoband seminary had been already established for a decade in the traditionalist vein, and the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College was set on the stage in 1875 at Aligarh in an ethos emulating Cambridge and Oxford. The real making of Farāhī is evidenced in the two educational phases that he would undergo, which included Anglo-Oriental learning.

The first phase of his education was characteristically traditional, that is, provided either at home or through training under individual teachers.⁸ As a little child, he began learning the Qur'an by heart at home. Later, he learnt Persian with a professional teacher of good standing, coming from Khayrābād school of Muslim scholarship, which was reputed for its rationalist

⁷ Sharfuddīn has dealt at great length on the relationship between the names Phrēhā and Farāhī. Based upon his oral history and investigation of some written materials, he estimated that probably Farāhī's family migrated from Afghanistan, and that they had some link with an obscure town by the name Farrāh there.

⁸ For a broad over of his two educational phases, see Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 111-145.

tendencies. At the age of fourteen, he moved to Azamgarh in 1877 to study Arabic and traditional sciences with his cousin, Nu^ʿmānī, who would act as a mentor on academic and career matters throughout his life. It is estimated that he studied for about six years with Nu^ʿmānī before his teacher left for Aligarh in 1883. There is no specific evidence about what he learned from Nu^ʿmānī. But conjecturally we can estimate, as suggested by his biographer, that Farāhī must have studied the established curriculum of Dars-i Nizāmī along with classical Arabic literary works such as *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥirīrī and *Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*. Looking at Nu^ʿmānī's life can throw further light on his influence on Farāhī.⁹ As his biography shows, Nu^ʿmānī remained occupied throughout his life with the question of striking a balance between the modern disciplines and the traditional Islamic sciences. Although his intellectual focus was more on writing on the development of Islamic theology and also on the lives of the Prophet, his Companions, and early Islamic jurists such as Abū Ḥanīfa, he was equally interested, in reformist terms, in the revisiting of the historical development of the Islamic sciences in order to answer new intellectual and religious questions. In this regard, he remained perplexed on the early development of Qur'anic exegesis as mentioned earlier in the Introduction to the current study. Moreover, Nu^ʿmānī seemed to have internalized the challenge brought by European works on the Qur'an. It is true that Farāhī later contributed to Nu^ʿmānī's view of the development of the Qur'anic sciences, but it was the latter's own unease as well with the state of the Islamic disciplines in the nineteenth century that must have contributed to Farāhī's intellectual development whose main focus was tracing the origins of the development of the Muslim sciences.

⁹ See Nadwī, *Ḥayāt-i Shiblī*.

The next major milestone in Farāhī's life was his two short sojourns at Lucknow and Rampur, a princely state in British India. At Lucknow, he studied with the famous scholar of Farangī Maḥall tradition, °Abd al-Ḥayy (d. 1886). Farangī Maḥall, as Robinson thinks, was perhaps more inclined towards the rationalist school in the Islamic sciences. After Lucknow, Farāhī went to Rampur to study with Irshād Ḥusayn, a well-known teacher in the Islamic sciences who was affiliated with the Mujaddidī tradition of Sufism. It is generally assumed by Sharfuddīn and his other students that Farāhī studied more on *uṣūl al-fiqh* ("theory of jurisprudence") and *fiqh* at Lucknow and Rampur.¹⁰

After his orientation to Islamic jurisprudence, Farāhī travelled to Lahore in the province of the Punjab to study Arabic literature, particularly poetry, with the famous scholar of the Oriental College, Fayḍ al-Ḥasan Sahāranpūrī (d. 1887). Earlier Nu°mānī had also studied with Sahāranpūrī and the same tradition continued with Farāhī. We can also conjecture that Nu°mānī advised him to travel to Lahore as it is established in Farāhī's biography that he played a major role as his advisor. Seeing Farāhī's overall work and the importance he ascribed to pre-Islamic Arabic literature in interpreting Qur'anic vocabulary and appreciating its diction (and all this had a contribution towards his conceiving of the theory of *naẓm*), it is quite arguable that with Sahāranpūrī, he underwent a transformative phase, a time period that made an imprint on his inquisitive mind. Moreover, when we compare Sahāranpūrī's work on early Arabic literature and on the Qur'an, it becomes evident that Farāhī, to a considerable extent, was the custodian of the heritage of studying the Qur'an as a masterpiece of Arabic literature as it was perceived in the

¹⁰ For a comparison of traditional madrasa curriculums of the time, see Appendices 1-3 in Robinson, °*Ulama of Farangi Mahall*, 240-251.

literary circles of pre-Mutiny Delhi.¹¹ Farāhī's concept of *naẓm* in itself was the product of his long deliberation on the Qur'an in the light of pre- and early Islamic literature, which was the main interest of Sahāranpūrī.

In the next phase of his intellectual development, Farāhī started receiving education in modern disciplines and thus, was able to think about religion more comprehensively given these various intellectual inputs.¹² Farāhī joined the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in 1891. But before coming to Aligarh, he studied for middle standard and secondary examination at Allahabad, in the colonially administered educational system; these studies took him six years to finish with some periods of breaks in between. The Aligarh school was then at the peak of inspiring young students at that time with the Cambridge-trained Theodore Beck as the Principal and Thomas Walker Arnold (d. 1930), the famous author of *Preaching of Islam* (1896), on the faculty for teaching philosophy. Nu^cmānī had already joined the college faculty. Farāhī completed his intermediate qualification in 1893, graduating along with Shawkat ^cAlī (d. 1938) of ^cAlī Brothers,¹³ and finished his bachelor's in 1895. For the next two years, he toyed with the ideas of doing the master's and LLB programs, but did not complete either of them before leaving for the distant city of Karachi (in present-day Sindh, Pakistan) to start his practical career as a teacher in the Islamic sciences at the Sindh Madrasat al-Islām.

There is nothing specifically evident in the sources as to what Farāhī gained from his years at Aligarh except for his passing through the regular curriculum including English and

¹¹ I would provisionally argue that in Farāhī, we had the glimpses of the old traditions of understanding the Qur'an that later became obscure due to the tendency to understand modern Islam in South Asia through the lens of intra-Sunni sectarian polemics and the secular academy's typologies to conceptualize Muslim scholarship.

¹² Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 148-171.

¹³ He was the elder brother of the renowned political leader, Muḥammad ^cAlī Jawhar (d. 1931). ^cAlī Brothers were active on multiple fronts, including political activism in the Khilafat Movement (1919-1924).

other courses of study. However, his biographers and peers mention his lack of fascination with Aligarh's ideals and his reservations about such Britishers as Arnold, since Farāhī considered him part of larger British politics in India.¹⁴ However, given his training and erudition in traditional disciplines, Farāhī was considered an outstanding student in the Islamic sciences and used to contribute to the translation of key classical Arabic and Persian texts into Urdu and English for curriculum purposes.¹⁵ Moreover, Aḥmad Khān also regarded him as an extremely competent student. His biographer notes that there is no evidence of his scholarly work at this stage, although Farāhī's *muqaddima* to his *tafsīr* on some occasions suggests that he had started working on *naẓm* from his student years. Despite the lack of sources about his life at Aligarh, we have enough evidence about Aligarh to give us an idea of what experiences he might have undergone. When Farāhī joined Aligarh, the college had already entered into a new phase of reconstructing its educational ideals.¹⁶ It was a transition from an emphasis on curriculum in vernacular languages towards enabling students to immerse themselves fully into an English curriculum for exact sciences and the humanities. The new British expatriate breed of Cambridge graduates such as Theodore Beck were busy infusing a new spirit of creativity among the Aligarh students.¹⁷ Parallel to this was the enthusiasm for classical Islamic learning that Nuḥmānī was trying to cultivate in his own specific style at the college. Hence, we can infer that Farāhī was seeing different currents of thought, not least of them was an emphasis on learning English and getting acquainted with contemporary European thought in the humanities.

¹⁴ Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, "Muṣannif kē Mukhtaṣar Ḥalāt-i Zindaḡī," in *Majmū'at Tafāsīr-i Farāhī*, trans. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (Lahore: Farān Foundation, 1998), 7-24.

¹⁵ Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 160-161.

¹⁶ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 204-252.

¹⁷ An important article on seeing Aligarh through the eyes of Beck is Theodore Beck, "The College at Aligarh," *Cambridge Review* V (1884).

With the start of his practical career, we begin noticing the publication of Farāhī's exegetical writings. Almost all of his writings throughout his career were in Arabic as he always directed his work to Muslim scholars in South Asia and elsewhere. He had moved to the Sindh Madrasa in 1897 and would teach there till 1906. The madrasa (present-day SMI University) had been established in 1885 and was regarded in those times as the Sindh Edition of Aligarh, and the exchange and recommendation of teachers among the two institutions was a common feature. During his stay, Farāhī also tried to move to Aligarh due to the long distance of Karachi from his hometown. The most noticeable event during this time period was his visit to the Hijaz in 1903 as the interpreter to the then British Viceroy Lord Curzon (1899-1905) as part of a political delegation that was to negotiate the Persian Gulf policy. There is a controversy among the commentators on his life as to his motive to be part of this delegation. His student, Iṣlāhī, opines that Farāhī regretted this decision for its apparent support of the British and did not like to discuss it in public. Others argue that it was an honour bestowed on him by the Viceroy for his being the selected interpreter between the English and the Arabs.¹⁸

Later he joined the Aligarh school, his alma mater, in 1907 and would stay there for two years on its faculty. This was yet another vibrant period in the Aligarh's intellectual life when the famous German Orientalist and biographer of the Prophet, Josef Horowitz (d. 1931) had joined the faculty and William A.J. Archbold (d. 1929) was the principal of the college. The sources state that Farāhī learned Hebrew from Horowitz and helped the latter on Arabic matters.¹⁹ Horowitz is also noted for his work on Arabic poetry and for his unfinished commentary on the Qur'an. We can conjecture that this exposure to Orientalist flavours might

¹⁸ Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 265-269.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 290.

have contributed to Farāhī's thinking, especially his works on the intertextuality of the Bible and the Qur'an.²⁰ At this stage, Farāhī had started writing some of his key works, and his rethinking the Qur'an and the history of Islamic disciplines was producing a creative output. A minor but important point as noticed in the sources is the name, "Professor Doubt," given to him by his students. It is said that on many questions pertaining to Islam and religion he would not answer with certainty, eliciting an attitude of reflection which suited the fact that he was conceiving a new project of restructuring the Islamic sciences.²¹

After Aligarh, Farāhī moved to Allahabad's Muir Central College because it was near to his hometown. Muir College had been established by the famous biographer of the Prophet, William Muir and was among those colleges established by the British for educating Indian populations. Farāhī worked there till 1914 before leaving for Hyderabad in the Deccan to join the Madrasa Dār al-°Ulūm. The madrasa was in need of fresh leadership to embark upon a new course of action and that need was fulfilled by Farāhī. During his stay at Hyderabad, he worked towards reinvigorating the institution that could cater to the needs of the changing times by blending a madrasa curriculum with modern disciplines. He did not stay there beyond 1919 because of reasons over which there is controversy in the sources. However, it is said that his vision was translated into the later established Osmania University in Hyderabad that emerged out of the madrasa.²² He returned to his home district Azamgarh in 1919 to take the leadership of the already existing Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ in its early form in the small *qaṣba* of Sarā'ē Mīr.

²⁰ On the question of whether Abraham sacrificed Iṣḥāq or Ismā'īl, see Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Al-Rā'y al-Ṣaḥīḥ fī man huwa al-Dhabīḥ* (Azamgarh: al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1994). Originally published in 1920.

²¹ Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 289.

²² *Ibid.*, 387-393.

A quick look at the practical career of Farāhī can be instructive for discerning some important elements of his thought and his activist tendencies during this period. He spent some twenty-three years (from 1897 to 1919) teaching at various institutions of differing ideologies. However, all these institutions were part of the drive towards negotiating the modernity brought in by the British with their institutional and epistemological values. At the heart of it was the central problem of the method and vision for educating the new generation. Religious decay was still the prevalent diagnosis among the Muslim scholarly elite as Metcalf has hinted.²³ What was evident to Farāhī and his peers was that the old process of educating Muslim students, that is, the traditional method had become somewhat inadequate in the new times. But equally problematic was the notion of following the British system of imparting learning that would come imbued with foreign values.

A good case study reflecting the world in which Farāhī envisioned his religious thought and activism was the Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ. The seminary had been founded in about 1908 under the initial name of Madrasa Iṣlāḥ al-Muslimīn in Sarā³ē Mīr. It was the outcome of the reformist activities of local people of religious leanings.²⁴ Between 1908 and 1919, there were debates within the leadership of the madrasa on its new vision. One can see a glimpse of these in different manifestos of the seminary that were published annually. Nu³mānī had written to Farāhī that he wanted to shape the madrasa on the lines of a traditional Hindu seminary, called a *gurūkul*, which had the form of a residential college.²⁵ At the behest of many who urged Farāhī to join it as its new transformational leader, he embarked upon steering the institution with his

²³ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 5.

²⁴ Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 419-450.

²⁵ Shiblī Nu³mānī to Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, Lucknow, 29 April 1910, in *Makātīb-i Shiblī*, vol. 2, 33. By *gurūkul*, Nu³mānī meant a place of simple life where religious service should be the main goal.

own vision. His student, Iṣlāhī, wrote a small document in consultation with Farāhī about the vision according to which the institution ran during his lifetime.²⁶ The following were the key points of the document that indicated the milieu in which the project had been conceived: eliminating unnecessary books of logic and philosophy from the curriculum, and teaching Arabic literature instead; imparting Ḥadīth education without any sectarian bias; teaching Islamic jurisprudence in a manner that would not provoke *fatwās* (sing. “legal opinion” or “verdict”) of *kufr* (“disbelief” or “infidelity”); imparting certain technical skills for addressing economic concerns; finally and most importantly, teaching the Qur’an and drawing upon it in a manner that would make it the basis for resolving all intellectual conflicts.

In a nutshell, there are three specific features of Farāhī’s intellectual formation that come to the fore. First was his orientation toward both the traditional Islamic sciences and the modern disciplines being taught in colonial India. Second was his fascination with pre-Islamic Arabic literature, which was one of the noticeable intellectual currents then present in North India, with Delhi as its centre. Third was his search for a central paradigm that could enable him to restructure the Islamic sciences and establish new educational institutions.

Before we move on to study his Qur’anic thought and how it took shape in colonial India, there are a few further interesting aspects of his intellectual and activist life that should be in our sight in order to understand him adequately. These aspects throw light on his being somewhat similar to the traditionalist contemporaries, despite a modernist image of him and his school in the discourses on modern Islam. Amidst a plethora of Farāhī’s writings, the researcher is always perplexed about how to place him as a religious scholar in the categories developed in

²⁶ Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 471.

the secular academy. The most important aspect of his Qur'an project was his stress on adherence to the Muslim scholarly tradition for any new strategy of Muslim reform. Despite his openness to rethink any prevailing religious opinions, the very first thing he was seen emphasizing was an enduring commitment to the Qur'an and the Sunna. The Sunna in Farāhī's thought was not equivalent to the written corpus of Ḥadīth but involved practical acts of ritual, such as *ṣalāt*, *zakāt*, *Hajj*, etc., and other agreed-upon *religious practices* in the Muslim tradition, dealing with society, economy and politics.²⁷ Similarly, Farāhī's political vision was very much in line with the general Muslim ethos of his time. In the political domain, he saw the institution of the caliphate as an ideal one and the militant act of *jihād* as a possible strategy if it were followed with wisdom and in the light of the Qur'an. For him, *jihād* was not meant as merely a defensive response but its execution depended on certain conditions. In any case, his ultimate vision was to see an Islamic state established where God's law should reign supreme.²⁸ His own Arabic *dīwān* ("collection") of poetry was full of illustrations of this, in which he lamented the Muslim plight in recent events in Tripoli in Libya and in the Balkan wars.²⁹ In the realm of the economy, Farāhī abhorred new positions on the questions of interest (*ribā*) and communism. *Ribā*, to him, was unlawful in all of its forms, whether nominal or exorbitant, and he saw communism as "unnatural" for human nature and society.³⁰ His main stress remained on

²⁷ See Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, "Aḥkām al-Uṣūl bi-Aḥkām al-Rasūl," in *Rasā'il fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2011), 107-126. Also see, Khālīd Mas'ūd, "Ḥadīth wa Sunnat kī Taḥqīq kā Farāhī Minhāj," in *Proceedings of Farāhī Seminar "Allama Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī: Ḥayāt wa Afkār"* (Azamgarh: Anjuman-i Ṭalaba-yi Qadīm Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ, 1992), 223-238.

²⁸ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Fī Malakūt Allāh* (Azamgarh: Al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1971). Also see, Niẓām al-Dīn Iṣlāḥī, "Mawlānā Farāhī awr Ḥukūmat-i Ilāhiyya," in *Proceedings of Farāhī Seminar "Allama Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī: Ḥayāt wa Afkār"* (Azamgarh: Anjuman-i Ṭalaba-yi Qadīm Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ, 1992), 453-472.

²⁹ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Dīwān*, ed. Badr al-Dīn Iṣlāḥī (Azamgarh: Al-Maṭba' al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1967), 8-10, 18-19. The *dīwān* remained in manuscript form till 1967.

³⁰ On his interpretation of the *ribā* verse, see 'Abd al-'Azīm Iṣlāḥī, "Imām Farāhī kā Iqtiṣādī Maslak," in *Proceedings of Farāhī Seminar "Allama Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī: Ḥayāt wa Afkār"* (Azamgarh: Anjuman-i Ṭalaba-yi Qadīm Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ, 1992), 514.

religious education, as manifested in his vision for the Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ, which he considered as the foundation for nurturing future generations, without dismissing the importance of the modern disciplines. In this light, we begin our journey of examining what Farāhī wrote about the Qur'an and what influenced him on his path.

Farāhī's Principles of Interpretation

Farāhī's work on his Qur'an commentary remained incomplete, and he was only able to write partial commentaries of selected Qur'anic suras in his *Tafsīr Niẓām al-Qur'ān*.³¹ But despite this fragmentary nature of his work, his ideas on Qur'anic hermeneutics were well known in his lifetime.³² His image as a Qur'an scholar was also enhanced by the patronage of Nuḥmānī who reviewed his work in the journal *al-Nadwa* published from Nadwat al-ʿUlamā'. Some of his other published writings and manuscripts throw further light on his larger Qur'an project and his vision of restructuring Muslim religious sciences. Farāhī's principles of exegesis as discussed in his *Muqaddima* to his *Tafsīr Niẓām al-Qur'ān* were posthumously published in 1938 from his incomplete manuscripts. The significance of these principles lay more in their being a document that encapsulated the social and intellectual tensions of the time than in their capacity to provoke intellectual debate in Farāhī's own lifetime. If we read Farāhī's Qur'anic hermeneutics more as a historical product than a contemporary agent of change or controversy, it

³¹ I have used the following edition in this dissertation. Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Tafsīr Niẓām al-Qur'ān wa Tā'wīl al-Furqān bi-l-Furqān* (Azamgarh: Al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2008). Farāhī's incomplete commentary on Sūrat al-Baqara was published in 2000 under the same title, *Tafsīr Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, by al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya. Farāhī's *tafsīr* was not published in one collection in his lifetime, though exegesis of individual suras were available in print. Later, his two students, Akhtar Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī and Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, edited the manuscripts of individual suras and published them in one volume in 1938. Sharfuddīn's research on the publication history of individual suras shows that Farāhī's *tafsīr* of Sūrat al-Lahab (Q 111) was perhaps the earliest of Farāhī's exegetical writings published around 1905. Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 708.

³² The bibliography on him throws light on the prominence of his thought in his own lifetime and afterwards in British India. Zafar Iṣlāḥī, *Kitābiyāt-i Farāhī*.

is clear that he was standing on the far end of the trajectory of Qur'anic thought that had been evolving since the time of Walī Allāh. It was the product of dialectics around “authentic” ways of interpreting Muslim scripture that had unfolded since the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Meta-Principles

Farāhī's Qur'anic hermeneutics can be understood in terms of both his meta-principles, which cut through his whole interpretive enterprise, and his operational principles.³³ In the case of the meta-principles, Farāhī began by discovering *naẓm* in the Qur'an as its central feature. He proposed to read the scripture in his intellectual milieu around his idea of *naẓm*. When we use the phrase “the *naẓm* principle” with respect to Farāhī's thought, it meant that the exegete laid stress on the basic rule that the whole Qur'an should be read based on his concept of *naẓm*, an idea that gave a distinctive quality to the Qur'an as a coherent text. What he actually meant by *naẓm* in terms of Qur'anic hermeneutics was not a mere inter-connectedness of verses (*rabṭ-i āyāt*), such as had informed the reading techniques from the pre-modern and early modern period, and as we saw in the case of Thānawī. In contrast to the earlier linear view of *naẓm*, Farāhī's theory approaches the Qur'anic text as a totality within which suras and groups of suras are intelligently interwoven. *Naẓm* encompasses the scripture at three levels. First, Farāhī identified coherence in each individual sura, manifested in the form of an *‘amūd* (“pillar” or “column”), a controlling theme around which a whole sura revolves. He normally divided a sura into different sections in which the content underwent shifts within the shared paradigm of the governing theme. Second, he posited a similar relationship between the consecutive units of a sura-pair. For instance, Sūrat al-Baqara (Q 2) and Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (Q 3) acted as a coherent pair

³³ For an earlier work that gives a broad overview of Farāhī's principles of exegesis, see Anas Naḍar, “Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī awr Jamhūr kē Uṣūl-i Tafsīr: Taḥqīqī wa Taqābulī Muṭāli‘a” (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 2003).

of suras revolving around a central theme of the corroboration (*ithbāt*) and necessity of belief in the *risāla* (“prophethood”) of the Prophet Muḥammad and the imperative of allegiance to him; both suras dealt with this theme in their own distinctive manner. Third, Farāhī identified, within the Qur’an as a whole, nine thematically and structurally coherent groups of suras, each group having an *‘amūd* that shapes its structure. Each sura within a given group deals with a specific aspect of this central theme of the group.³⁴

Naẓm in Farāhī’s exegesis was thus a complex, multi-layered phenomenon, and there are number of related questions that still need to be explored in detail despite the familiarity with his concept in academic circles. Foremost among these questions is the issue of how the *‘amūd* is actually to be identified and how it helps to determine meaning at various levels in a sura. For Farāhī, “meaning” referred to the original signification of the Qur’an for its very first audience when it was revealed, and uncovering this was the main goal that the exegete sought to fulfill in his exegetical project. He anticipated an obvious question about what it looked like for the early Muslims to think of the Qur’an in terms of its *naẓm*. In order to answer this question, he offered his historical imagining of what the Companions of the Prophet as early Muslims would have been thinking on this aspect of the Qur’an. He opined:

You may, however, ask that if the Qur’anic *naẓm* was such a great and immensely useful thing [to understand the Qur’an], then why did the Companions of the Holy Prophet remain silent about this and why did the Prophet himself not explain this. I would answer that the context of the verses was very clear to the Companions. The verses were clearly and specifically related to their circumstances and issues at hand. If we were living in that blessed time, the *naẓm* would have been very evident upon us. Precisely that is the reason that a very small amount of exegetical narratives is reported from the Companions. This is because Qur’anic language, its diction, and circumstances and issues were all theirs [that is, no extra-Qur’anic aid was required]. Of all these [historical] things, there is nothing that we share today with the Companions. If that is the case, then how can we be similar to them in situation in terms of understanding *naẓm*? But, despite this great difference, it is also true that in

³⁴ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Dalā’il al-Niẓām* (Azamgarh: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1968), 92-105.

the larger sweep of the Qur'anic text and in its depth, there are usually [some] linguistic cues that lead us to move forward. If somebody is not careless and deliberates on the text in parts and as a whole, these cues divulge the [hidden] *nazm*.³⁵

Thus, to Farāhī, interpretive problems emerged due to the ambiguities of historical context and language that are actually the result of our being distanced from the time of the Prophet. He argued that it is by his method of discovering *nazm*, hidden in *‘amūd*, that an exegete can solve the problem of temporal difference.

There are some questions that emerge in linguistic terms. First, how is the historical context of a sura determined by Farāhī? Second, how far has this historical context a bearing on the identification of a certain *nazm* in a sura? The two questions lead us to the third: Does the choice, among many options, of a particular historical context and a specific meaning of verses, have a bearing on the *‘amūd* of a sura, on which Farāhī's whole idea of *nazm* was standing. The point is that it needs to be investigated in Farāhī's system how far his own choices of context and meaning shaped his proclaimed discovery of coherence in the text of the Qur'an and how far this discovery was objective and independent of his choice. All these questions originate from the somewhat broad and unclear nature of the guidelines that Farāhī provided for unfolding *nazm* in the Qur'an. In terms of interpretive procedure, what he recommended as a method to discover *nazm* was serious and frequent reading of a Qur'anic sura in order to identify its controlling theme. Moreover, Farāhī stressed the indispensability of developing advanced familiarity with three major features of the scripture: its specific literary idiom on the pattern of pre-Islamic *Jāhili* literature, reflected, for instance, in the cases of ellipses in the Qur'anic text; the similitude between the Qur'an and the speeches of *Jāhili* orators; and the Qur'an's quality of making

³⁵ Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 22.

frequent changes in the addressees to which it directs its speech. Over and above these recommendations, Farāhī urged the need to apply these principles with wisdom and care, implying that this seriousness in the exegetical process would ultimately result in discovering *naẓm* in the Qur'an, which, he claimed, he did.

Reading from Farāhī's other works³⁶ on *uṣūl al-tafsīr*, we can discern some operational guidelines that he adopted in order to argue for an interpretation based on the *naẓm* principle. First, Farāhī explained that any interpretation of a verse or a sura based on the principle of *naẓm* should provide us a "better" *tā'wīl* ("interpretation") as compared to other possible *tā'wīlāt*. Thus, the *naẓm* principle was of no use if it did not enhance our understanding of the Qur'an. Second, the discovery of *naẓm* should bring to light the hidden *ḥikma* ("wisdom" or "rationale") of verses or suras in a better way. While other arguable pieces of wisdom can be there, *naẓm*, when carefully discovered, would provide us a better underlying rationale of the Qur'an. Third, *ʿamūd* is the central feature of Farāhī's concept of *naẓm*. *Naẓm* in any instance is nothing if a valid *ʿamūd* is not identified. Fourth, *naẓm* should provide a total connectedness, that is, it offers not only immediate connections between consecutive verses, but unfolds a network of connections throughout a sura or a set of suras. Finally, Farāhī argued that any claim for the discovery of *naẓm* in the Qur'an should be based on textual evidence given in the Qur'an. This evidence for *naẓm* should not draw upon the extra-Qur'anic imagination of an exegete. In addition to the above practical method to identify *naẓm*, Farāhī warned the reader that despite an exegete's having claimed that a particular *naẓm* had been ferreted out from a Qur'anic discourse,

³⁶ On his principles of interpretation, in addition to Farāhī's *muqaddima* to his *Tafsīr Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, see Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Al-Takmil fī Uṣūl al-Tā'wīl* (Azamgarh: Al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1968); and Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Niẓām*.

any understanding based on *nazm* should not run counter to other Qur'anic verses at all. Hence, to Farāhī, the final test for the valid *nazm* was its harmony with the Qur'an itself.

Farāhī defined the concept in terms of three attributes: *tartīb* (“order”), *tanāsub* (“proportion”), and *waḥdāniyya* (“unity”). He further elaborated the last feature as follows:

In short, we mean by *niḏām* that a sura is a totality, and is also connected to the sura that precedes it and the one that follows it, or to that which precedes or follows it at one remove ... On the basis of this principle, the entire Qur'an will appear as a single discourse, being well-structured and woven together, from beginning to end.³⁷

While explaining *nazm*, Farāhī also maintained, based on his theological expectations from the Qur'an, that coherence should be an essential quality of a divine text. This imagined theological necessity led him to detect, in practical, hermeneutical terms, an order of the highest level in the scripture, something he considered to be an internal property of the Qur'an that was not dependent upon any *ẓannī* (“conjectural”) or less reliable sources such as *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

The second meta-principle that Farāhī endorsed was interpreting one set of Qur'anic verses in the light of other Qur'anic verses having a similar theme, usually referred to by the phrase, *tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān* (“interpretation of the Qur'an through Qur'an”). He maintained that an important internal resource of the Qur'an is the evidence available *within the text* itself for the divinely intended meaning, a hermeneutical approach that is quite conspicuous in modern-day commentaries but is also attested from pre-modern times in the exegetical tradition. Farāhī claimed that this internal evidence serves two purposes. First, it assists in understanding various passages that sometimes appear ambiguous. On one occasion, the Qur'an may address a matter in a broad sense, but on another, will elaborate it with specific illustrations. Farāhī quoted from al-Suyūṭī:

³⁷ Farāhī, *Dalā'il al-Niḏām*, 75.

The scholars have said that whoever wants to interpret the Qur'an, he should begin interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself. In the Qur'an, the thing that seems a bit generic at one place will be seen as elaborated with details at another place...If *tafsīr* is not possible from the Qur'an itself, then one can turn to the Sunna because the Sunna explains and interprets the Qur'an...However, if it is not possible to interpret based on the Sunna, then one can turn to the sayings of the Companions.³⁸

The Qur'an itself, therefore, gives clues to how we should understand the *tā'wīl* of its different verses. Moreover, it is the scripture itself that can solve the grammatical and literary problems that its text may apparently present. Thus, the text itself will adjudicate on the question of how the Arabs of the Prophet's time would use their language. In outlining this principle, Farāhī tried to distinguish himself from others by his stress on making all the external resources, including the Arabic lexicon, pre-modern grammatical texts, and *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* works, subservient to the scripture. As will be explained below, this stress lay behind his grand program of restructuring the Islamic sciences on lines different from their historical evolution as he perceived it. Farāhī said that this stress on the Qur'an led him to build a hierarchy of the sources to interpret the Qur'an in the following order: the Qur'an as the supreme source; the sayings of the Prophet as reported in the Ḥadīth corpus; the understandings of the Companions as reported in reliable reports (*āthār*) ascribed to them.

In addition to the above two meta-principles, Farāhī proposed other guidelines (*muqaddimāt*) or operational principles for a reader of the Qur'an. We can attempt to categorize these principles along three dimensions: the use of historical sources; intertextuality; and linguistic principles.

³⁸ Farāhī, *Nizām al-Qur'ān*, 23.

The Question of Historical Sources

In the case of the use of historical sources in the interpretation of the Qur'an, we can begin by studying Farāhī's stance on *asbāb al-nuzūl*.³⁹ In many ways, he echoed the pre-modern exegetical tradition, Walī Allāh's thought, and the exegetical concerns of Farāhī's own age as manifested in the works of Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī. However, there were some differences between Farāhī and Walī Allāh, particularly in terms of the former's emphasis on the Qur'an for discovering the immediate context of a verse or verses. Farāhī noted that it was generally held that these *asbāb* were the reports or the narratives of particular incidents that occasioned the divine revelation of a sura or specific passages of the Qur'an on the Prophet. He differed with this general understanding prevalent in his contemporary times. Farāhī explained that *asbāb al-nuzūl* depicted those issues or set of issues that a specific sura dealt with. Therefore, he argued that there was no need to search beyond Qur'anic verses for their immediate historical contexts. In Farāhī's opinion, his own understanding seemed similar to what was held by early Muslims like the Companions of the Prophet and early exegetes. He said that even books of traditional sciences of the Qur'an hinted at what he was referring to by *asbāb al-nuzūl*. Farāhī reminded the reader of al-Suyūṭī, whom Walī Allāh also referred to when he discussed this issue in his *Al-Fawz Al-Kabīr*. Al-Suyūṭī had said:

Al-Zarkashī writes in *Al-Burhān*: It is known as the common practice of the Companions and their Successors that when one of them says that the verse was revealed about a given matter (*nazalat hadhih al-āya fī kadhā*), he means that the verse encompasses [or deals with] that matter or injunction; not that the matter was the reason of its revelation. This is a way of the Companions to derive a law based on a Qur'anic verse. By doing this, the intention is not to report a historical fact

³⁹ In addition to his *muqaddima*, Farāhī discussed his position on *asbāb al-nuzūl* in Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, "Asbāb al-Nuzūl Yata'allaq bi-Kitāb Aḥkām al-Uṣūl," in *Rasā'il fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2011), 128-139.

about the revelation of the verse. I would also say that the revelation of the relevant verse and the incident connected with it might not have coincided.⁴⁰

However, what Walī Allāh actually meant by his stance on *asbāb al-nuzūl* is a disputed matter, as discussed in the Introduction.

In addition to *asbāb al-nuzūl*, Farāhī discussed other historical sources for the interpretation of the Qur'an. In his thought, we can divide these historical sources into two categories in terms of hierarchy of epistemological certitude: 1) Most authentic and foundational resources; 2) Ancillary and supporting resources. He characterized the Qur'anic text in the first category and placed the following in the secondary category due to their less authentic nature: prophetic traditions and the Companions' *āthār*; established historical facts; and religious scriptures. Farāhī explained that he was inclined to read prophetic traditions in the light of the Qur'an and not vice versa, a practice he claimed to have shared with the founders of the Shāfi'i and Ḥanbalī schools, and also with Aḥl-i Ḥadīth scholars. Thus, he found no problem in dismissing those traditions that contradicted Qur'anic verses and those that dismantled the otherwise coherent structure of the scripture's verses and passages. In the case of the legends of the People of the Book, Farāhī opined that on many occasions early exegetes borrowed these *isrā'iliyyāt* from Jewish converts, and thereby gave them a seemingly permanent place in the exegetical records. Thus, these were not reliable by any standard. However, in the case of the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures, they were safer to use in the interpretation of the Qur'an as long as these did not contradict the Qur'an.

⁴⁰ Cited in Farāhī, *Nizām al-Qur'ān*, 25.

Third, into the category of his historical principles also falls Farāhī's discussion of the social background of pre-Islamic Arabia from which the Qur'an emerged. In this regard, he attempted to explain the terms *ma^crūf* and *munkar* in the context of pre-Islamic Arabia. He opined that *ma^crūf* referred to the established norms of acceptable and pious behaviour as valued by the Arabs of the Prophet's times. By contrast, *munkar* meant the values and related acts deemed condemnable and abominable by the people in general. In his historical understanding of pre-Islamic Arabia, Farāhī differed with the widely held interpretation among Muslims that the time of *Jāhiliyya* was a period of extreme wickedness and that it was devoid of any element worthy of admiration, including pre-Islamic Arabs' lack of any sense of good and evil. On the contrary, as Farāhī argued, this period produced literature that was comparable to what was found in other civilizations. This pre-Islamic *Jāhili* background, Farāhī contended, illuminated the existence of a fair sense of virtue – it was thus a milieu whose understanding would help the reader of the Qur'an better appreciate its message and intervention into that society.

The Inter-Textuality of the Qur'an and Other Religious Sources

Some of Farāhī's principles of exegesis can be discussed from the perspective of the inter-textuality of the Qur'an and other texts. He began by discussing the inter-textuality of the Qur'an and the Bible. He explained that, in general, the Bible and the Qur'an shared the same language families and the same basic message, and that their ideas converged on many themes. Farāhī further elaborated that the Qur'an, on many occasions, engaged with biblical stories and ideas by referring to them in broad strokes without giving much detail. Therefore, reading the Bible would illuminate one's Qur'anic reading by providing more details. Many times, the Qur'an corroborated, explained, or improved the biblical narrative. All this asked for reading the Bible in the light of the Qur'an, a tendency also echoed in the case of Aḥmad Khān and

Thānawī. Farāhī accentuated the reading of the Bible in contrast to many of his contemporaries who would discourage to read it in a milieu of Christian-Muslim disputations. For him, this new orientation to the Bible was necessary for better understanding the role that the last of God's scriptures, the Qur'an, was meant to play. He also emphasized that, in essence, the Bible was the word of God as well.

Other than the Bible, Farāhī expended time to discuss the intertextuality of the Qur'an and Ḥadīth. However, here he warned the reader to develop a specialist sense of the Ḥadīth corpus before attempting to connect specific prophetic traditions with Qur'anic suras and passages, or to read the Qur'an in the light of Ḥadīth. While he did believe in the possibility of the application of ḥadīth reports to Qur'anic verses for better understanding the latter (and he definitely applied these reports on many occasions), he tacitly condemned the perceivably widespread, traditionalist use of these reports for the interpretation of the Qur'an. To Farāhī, using prophetic traditions without caution meant developing a confused sense of Islamic positions on many legal and theological issues. While professing his position, he was also concerned with the possible censure of contemporary Muslim scholars, particularly in the milieu that was prompting the Ahl-i Ḥadīth and Deoband schools to expand for Muslim reform.⁴¹

Linguistic Principles

Farāhī's treatment of Qur'anic linguistics was by far the most rigorous area of exegetical activity for him, as it was for Aḥmad Khān. In the polemical milieu and the widely perceived degenerated conditions of Muslims in colonial India, Farāhī was concerned with developing an authentic method of arriving at the definitive meaning of Qur'anic vocabulary and passages.

⁴¹ Farāhī, *Nizām al-Qur'ān*, 70.

Ultimately, he claimed to have developed a reliable approach to the authentic linguistic resources through which the Qur'an could be interpreted. To him, God not only protected the Qur'an from any textual perversion, He also catered to the interpretive needs of the community. To him, this was evident in the history of the Arabic language, which had preserved the meanings of the Qur'an as far as the needs of Qur'anic interpretation were concerned. He explained that it happened first in the case of the preservation of the meanings of all the technical terms used in the Qur'an like *ṣalāt* ("ritual prayer"), *zakat* ("ritual alms tax"), *jihād*, *ṣawm* ("fasting"), *Ḥajj* ("annual pilgrimage"), *ḥarām* ("unlawful"), and *ṣafā* and *marwah*, the names of two hills used in the *Ḥajj* pilgrimage. To Farāhī, the unanimous meaning of all these terms persisted throughout the centuries of Muslim tradition. In this regard, minor differences did not occasion a great amount of controversy in practicing or understanding them. In the case of specific issues of Qur'anic interpretation, where there was no agreed upon understanding like that in the case of above religious terms, Muslims should follow what had been handed down to them by early Muslim generations through *tawātur* ("perpetual, widespread, and continuous transmission"), instead of entering into hair-splitting controversies or drawing upon *akhbār-i āḥād* ("solitary reports") in the Ḥadīth corpus.

In addition to the *tawātur* of Qur'anic meaning, Farāhī prioritized the text of the Qur'an and pre-Islamic Arabic poetry over and above the Arabic lexicon when interpreting the text of the Qur'an. On the question of the authenticity of the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry, he recognized that on occasions one would find inauthentic content in it as well. However, with a specialist lens and with a loyalty to the text of the Qur'an, unreliable content in this corpus could be sifted out. To him, the early development of the Arabic lexicon was mostly a human work, and though it could be a starting point for the reader of the Qur'an, he or she should refer to its

primary sources, that is, the Qur'an and *Jāhili* literature, whenever a question would arise on Qur'anic vocabulary or its characteristic diction.⁴²

In addition to the issue of linguistic resources of the Qur'an, one of the main elements of Farāhī's view of Qur'anic linguistics was his stress on the definitive signification (*qaṭ'ī al-dalāla*) of Qur'anic words, phrases, and verses. Reading Farāhī directly can be illuminating for recognizing his particular stresses in this regard:

The Holy Qur'an is definitive in its intended signification. Accepting the possibility (*iḥtimāl*) that a verse can have other meanings as well is simply the result of our lack of knowledge and deliberation. Those scholars who have reported many sayings in their books of exegesis only intend that they [want to] lay before us whatever has been said on a particular verse. By doing this, they have left with us the task of choosing a preferred (*rājiḥ*) meaning. Hence, it does not seem appropriate for us to memorize every reliable and unreliable thing mentioned in these books without exercising our preference and choice, as it will keep us living in a state of utter confusion and perplexity. For instance, have a look at the meaning of the word *fitna* in Q 2:191 in the *tafsīr* of al-Rāzī. He has told us five meanings of the word. Obviously, not all can be correct. Hence, I have reported only those sayings in my book that seemed reliable to me based on my research. And [it is important to note] that this has been the path of our [intellectual] forefathers. An abundance of sayings perplexes an inquisitive mind. Sometimes people only mention one or more of sayings [on a verse] without mentioning the reason of their choice. This is an utter injustice to those who reported such sayings and those who read these reports. I have not chosen the meaning of verses from the books of *tafsīr*; instead, I have reflected on Qur'anic verses based on their context and in the light of other verses having similar themes. In this way, when the meanings of some verses became evident to me, then I referred to the commentaries of al-Rāzī and al-Ṭabarī. In this procedure, sometimes I found an earlier saying in line with what I had figured out; on other occasions, I saw my understanding closer to what had been said before; still on some occasions, I had to change my opinion that I had formed [based on my study, independent of commentaries]. It also happened on a number of occasions that I faced such an intellectual difficulty on an interpretive issue that I had to wait for a long time [to arrive at a decision]. In any case, I attributed this difficulty and doubt to my own lack of knowledge and understanding, and to my careless subscribing (*taqlīd*) to wrong, older opinions.⁴³

⁴² For Farāhī's treatment of the selected vocabulary of the Qur'an, see Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Mufradāt al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ajmal Ayyūb Iṣlāḥī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2002). Originally published ca. 1940.

⁴³ Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 39.

In short, in Farāhī, we can see a new program of interpreting the text of the Qur'an unfolding and, by consequence, an outlook that envisaged re-visiting the development of the Islamic sciences as they have developed in the preceding centuries. However, in essence, he was not much different from Thānawī in his approach to the use of earlier commentaries. The difference lied in their practical use of these pre-modern resources within their larger projects and for their particular interpretive goals.

Experiencing Farāhī's Exegesis

Before we look at Farāhī's art of interpreting the text of the Qur'an by analyzing his exegetical approaches, reading a brief selection from his *tafsīr* of Sūrat al-Tīn (Q 95) will give us a direct flavour of his work. The chosen text is small, but it orients us with the exegete's thinking before we study his art of interpretation in detail in the next section. The context is of interpreting the verse 7 of the sura: *famā yukadhdhibuka ba'du bi-l-dīn* ("After this, what makes you [man] deny the Judgement?"). The verses of this short sura read as follows:

1 By the fig, by the olive, 2 by Mount Sinai, 3 by this safe town, 4 We create man in the finest state 5 then reduce him to the lowest of the low, 6 except those who believe and do good deeds—7 they will have an unfailing reward. After this, what makes you [man] deny the Judgement? 8 Is God not the most decisive of judges?

Farāhī explained the verse in the following manner:

For the *tā'wīl* of this verse, there exists two traditional sayings. One says: hence, "O Man, what makes you deny *jazā* after this." This *tā'wīl* is adopted by Mujāhid. Therefore, when it was said to Mujāhid that here the addressee is the Prophet, he replied: "*Ma'ādih Allāh* ["I seek refuge with Allāh"]. How can this be? Here the addressee is man." Al-Zamakhsharī has also adopted this *tā'wīl*. But he understands *takdhīb* in *yukadhdhibuka* as meaning *ḥammil 'alā takdhīb*, that is, "encouraging towards *takdhīb*". Had this meaning been proven lexically, then this *tā'wīl* would have been quite clear, but al-Zamakhsharī has not presented any evidence for this.

The second *tā'wīl* is: "Hence O Messenger, what makes you deny *jazā* after this." Farrā⁴⁴ has adopted this *tā'wīl*. This *tā'wīl* is sound to the extent that here there is

⁴⁴ Mujāhid, al-Zamakhsharī, and Farrā³ were pre-modern commentators of the Qur'an.

no deviation from the word's popular or accepted meaning. But in the light of context of the discourse (*kalām*) and the situation [in the form] of a question, this *tā'wīl* is not sound. It is difficult to understand this as an address to the Prophet in the wake of the two instances of putting a question. And the strength of *famā yukadhdhibuka* and the stress of the word *ba'd* become hidden if we take this *tā'wīl*. Hence, if we consider the context and the beauty of *naẓm*, the most preferred *tā'wīl* is what has been chosen by Mujāhid. In this case, the word exists in its original meaning and considering the two meanings of *yukadhdhibuka*, which we mentioned above, the word's two interpretations become very strong and elegant [in this chosen *tā'wīl*].⁴⁵

There are two immediate impressions that a reader obtains from this. First, Farāhī in no way tried to belittle the earlier exegetical tradition, an often alleged feature of the *tafsīr* of modernists, including the Farāhī school. Second, he seemed obsessed with finding a more convincing answer of what the words and verses meant rather than explaining them away under the pretext of following a traditionalist approach, as we saw in *Thānawī*. This theme will be discussed more when we study Farāhī's larger Qur'an project in the last section of this chapter. With having some idea of how he wrote, let us take a closer look at his art of interpretation.

Farāhī's Methodology

A Case Study from Farāhī's Commentary – Sūrat al-Tīn (Q 95)⁴⁶

This case study is focused on Sūrat al-Tīn (Q. 95). The reason for narrowing the focus on this portion of Farāhī's exegesis is that here we can see many of the exegete's interpretive principles being applied. Moreover, Farāhī's interpretation of the sura is not only seen as following a non-traditionalist pattern of understanding the Qur'an,⁴⁷ but also challenges some of

⁴⁵ Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 371-372.

⁴⁶ My study of Farāhī's interpretation of Q 95 is based on Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 335-378.

⁴⁷ Here I mean traditionalist opponents like *Thānawī*, who, although, did not react to Farāhī's approach to Q 95, considered some of his theological beliefs as "heretical" and also gave verdicts declaring him a *kāfir* ("infidel"). See Muḥammad Sa'ūd 'Ālim Qāsmī, "Mu'jiza kē bārē mēṅ Mawlānā Farāhī awr Shāh Walī Allāh kē Afkār kē Taqābulī Muṭāli'a," in *Proceedings of Farāhī Seminar "Allama Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī: Ḥayāt wa Afkār"* (Azamgarh: Anjuman-i Ṭalaba-yi Qadīm Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ, 1992), 158-160.

the ways of recognizing modernist elements in the modern Qur'an commentary such as of Baljon, which I discussed in the Introduction. Farāhī's conclusions matched in some way with another less known exegete in India, whose method Baljon considered a break with the pre-modern *tafsīr*.⁴⁸ Here, by contrast, we will see that Farāhī sophisticated approach borrowed many elements from the pre-modern exegetical tradition.

Here I will investigate how Farāhī determined the meaning of the two words, *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn* within the context of the sura and the Qur'an. The sura runs as follows:

1 By the fig (*al-tīn*), by the olive (*al-zaytūn*), 2 by Mount Sinai (*tūr sīnīn*), 3 by this safe town (*al-balad al-amīn*), 4 We create man in the finest state 5 then reduce him to the lowest of the low, 6 except those who believe and do good deeds—7 they will have an unfailing reward. After this, what makes you [man] deny the Judgement? 8 Is God not the most decisive of judges?

In the context of colonial India, many of the traditionalist exegetical positions, such as Thānawī's, would read the sura with the following general or agreed upon understanding. According to this understanding, *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn* denote types of trees and their respective fruits. This interpretation is in harmony with many other exegetical opinions on the verses.⁴⁹ However, the traditionalist position also accommodates that these two words might also mean the places or mountains where these trees are in abundance like Syria (*al-Shām*), which was considered the breeding ground of divinely appointed prophets. The phrase *the finest state* (in verse 4) meant the prime of youth, and the subsequent downfall (in verse 5) meant weakness in

⁴⁸ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 28.

⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī reported multiple interpretations of the verses of Q 95. *Al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn* are understood as fig and olive fruits. But others, as he reported, have also understood *al-tīn* as a mosque or a mountain in Damascus. *Al-zaytūn* is understood as *bayt al-maqdis* ("Jerusalem") or the mountain of *bayt al-maqdis*. Al-Ṭabarī subscribed to the opinion the two words signify specific fruits (*alladhī yū³kal wa yu^cṣar*). Abū Ja^cfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jamī^c al-Bayān 'an Tā³wīl Āy al-Qur³ān*, vol. 24 (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥijr, 2001), 501-504.

the old age. According to this widely held stance, these different stages during the human life cycle are the signs of God's power over every facet of man's life.⁵⁰ Ṭhānawī quoted the excerpt from the verse Q 30:54: *Allāhu alladhī khalaqakum min ḍu'af* ("It is God Who creates you weak") as a Qur'anic proof of his correct interpretation.⁵¹

We can begin exploring Farāhī's approach to the sura by studying its *ʿamūd* that he identified. Farāhī wrote:

Anyone who reflects on the sura will immediately know that its *ʿamūd* is the affirmation of *jazā* ("reward"), that is, [the fact that] on the day of judgment, Allāh the Almighty will reward and punish based on people's deeds. The sura begins with [some] oaths and we have written in detail in our book, *Al-Imʿān fī Aqsām al-Qurʿān*,⁵² that these oaths are of special kind. The purpose of these oaths is to present as witness the objects on which the oath [of this kind] is based (*muqsam bihi*) in order to corroborate what is intended by these oaths (*muqsam ʿalayhi*), [which is reward and punishment in this case]. Unlike ordinary oaths, it is not intended in this case to glorify the object on which the oath is based (*muqsam bihi*).⁵³

According to Farāhī, God introduced the four signs (*al-tīn*, *al-zaytūn*, Mount Sinai, and the "secure land") in the sura as witnesses in order to exhort and proclaim the truth mentioned in *laqad khalqna al-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm* (verse 4). The four signs are: 1) Mount Fig, which he identified as Mount Jūdiyy⁵⁴ and which is connected with the stories of Adam and Noah; it highlights God's scheme of reward and punishment; 2) Mount Olive is where Jesus used to pray and that is where it was decided by God that the Jews as a nation would be no longer the

⁵⁰ Ashraf ʿAlī Ṭhānawī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qurʿān*, vol. 3, 668.

⁵¹ Q 30:54: "It is God who creates you weak, then gives you strength, then weakness after strength, together with your grey hair: He creates what He will; He is the All Knowing, the All Powerful."

⁵² Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Imʿān fī Aqsām al-Qurʿān*, trans. Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (Lahore: Anjuman-i Khuddām al-Qurʿān, 1975. Originally published in 1911, Farāhī's Arabic text is accessible via <https://www.hamid-uddin-farahi.org>.

⁵³ Farāhī, *Nizām al-Qurʿān*, 337.

⁵⁴ It is identified as a mountain mass and its highest point is in southeast Turkey. There is a disagreement on the actual site that the Qur'anic story of Noah refers. See William M. Brinner, "Jūdī," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʿān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed November 24, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00245.

favoured people and thus the Prophet Muḥammad's coming was foreseen; 3) Mount Ṭūr⁵⁵ is where Moses began his call to convey the divine message; and 4) Mecca⁵⁶ is the secure place where Abraham stayed and started a new episode of peace and habitation in the land. These four historical signs in the form of oaths bore witness to the fact that God made man in the best of the moulds (verse 4), that is, he was endowed with the consciousness of good and evil, and subsequently, due to his own choice of evil, man made himself deserving to be thrown in lowliness.

How far the above interpretation by Farāhī is plausible in terms of Qur'anic and biblical hermeneutics is a question I will leave aside here. But what is prominent is that Farāhī here had to offer something apparently very stable and concrete to the modern reader who might be otherwise perplexed by the apparent "logical" disconnect between the verses of the sura when these were read strictly in the light of earlier exegetical traditions. This perplexity is seen in many modern *tafsīr* texts, including Thānawī's, over the connection between the first three verses and the rest of the sura. Therefore, exegetes are often seen considerably amplifying to make an ordinary educated reader at ease with the sura. A part of this felt need to stabilize the meaning of the text, which Farāhī fulfilled, was the product of intellectual and reformist currents of colonial India in which there was pressure to read a sura as a unity. Below we give a detailed look at Farāhī's method of interpreting the sura.

⁵⁵ "It occurs ten times in the Kurān expressly coupled with Sīnā³/ Sīnīn, specifically meaning Mount Sinai. Virtually all its occurrences in the Kurān are connected with the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the Sinai Desert." E. Honigmann and C.E. Bosworth, "al-Ṭūr," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman et al, 2nd ed., accessed December 29, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_1255.

⁵⁶ The *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* defines it as the birthplace of the Prophet and observes that "a description of Mecca based strictly upon the Qur'an could lead to the radical revision of a large number of stories from classical Arabic sources, which are most often of a mythical or legendary kind." J. Chabbi, "Mecca," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, accessed November 24, 2017, http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQSIM_00275.

Philological Analysis and the Pre-Modern Exegesis

Our focus will be on how Farāhī determined the signification of the words *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn*. He characteristically began by searching for the *‘amūd* of the sura which in his opinion was the corroboration of reward and punishment (*jazā o sazā kā ithbāt*). But this search for the *‘amūd* basically drew upon pre-modern exegetical positions on the sura. His exegesis of the sura was the result of his reconciling the positions mentioned in earlier commentaries with his own hermeneutical methods. Farāhī explained that here God employed a method of argument that was based on the diction of offering an oath (*qasm*). In such a Qur’anic diction, in Arabic literary tradition, readers are invited to think about some historical or natural objects (or phenomena) that, in fact, allude to certain facts or events. Hence offering an oath meant presenting something as a proof of or witness to something. In the case of this sura, Farāhī explained that the four witnesses presented were referring to some specific events whose history made it clear that God is not unaware of what humans have been doing, and He has been rewarding and punishing them based on their deeds as recorded in the stories of these events. This also verified that God will also do the same on the Last Judgment. Moreover, the truth of the prophethood of the Prophet Muḥammad was being corroborated in the Qur’an by alluding to these events, implying thereby that just like in the cases of biblical prophets, the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad was to decide the fate of his audiences after making his message glaringly clear (*itmām al-ḥujja*).

While the signification of the words *tūr sīnīn* (“Mount Sinai”) and *balad al-amīn* (“the secure land”) was, to a great extent, agreed-upon in the Muslim exegetical tradition, the words *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn* had been the key sites whose particular understanding lent support to what Farāhī would call the *‘amūd* of the sura, an understanding which ultimately helped a smooth

reading of the text. The rest of the vocabulary is also important, but if one is convinced of Farāhī's interpretation of these two words, the rest of the sura can convey a different but coherent sense. Our objective here is to see the art of Farāhī's exegetical practice. In the case of the first two elements of Qur'anic vocabulary, *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn*, he claimed that these places acted as the sites and instances of moral lessons among Arabs as found in their poetry. He defended himself that he had not deviated from the earlier exegetical tradition and that these possible significations were already part of the corpus of exegetical reports. He reminded the reader of an *athar* ("a tradition attributed a Companion") ascribed to °Ikrama ibn Abī Jahl (d. 636), who said on one occasion that it meant fruits, and on another, two mountains. Al-Ṭabarī also recorded the meanings chosen by Farāhī. In the next phase, he drew upon literary and biblical analysis as seen below to analyze the matter further.

Q 95, Classical Arabic Poetry, and the Bible

Farāhī first started investigating the word *al-tīn*. Based on his study of classical Arabic literature, he explained that it was common knowledge among the Arabs that this was the name of a mountain where the fig fruit was found in abundance. He elaborated that this manner of naming the trees was a common method among the Arabs. In the next instance, Farāhī went on to identify the use of the word *al-tīn* in the poetry such as in the famous pre-Islamic poet, al-Nābigha al-Dhubiyānī, on whom his teacher, Sahāranpūrī had penned a literary commentary. Farāhī also noted that another classical poet, Abū Ṣa°ra Būlānī, used the word *jūdiyy* instead of *al-tīn* for a mountain with the same imagery employed by the former poet in the case of *al-tīn*. Next, Farāhī analyzed the pre-modern debates among Arab literati over the exact location of these two mountains (that is, either *al-tīn* or *jūdiyy*) which the poets were referring to in their couplets. After offering a detailed philological inquiry, Farāhī opined in the end that, despite

opposing arguments as to the location of these mountains, it is plausible to consider these mountains as the same, that is, as the place which early Arabs considered to be located in the neighbourhood of Iraq. He concluded that at least it seemed settled that *al-tīn* meant either some unidentified northern mountain, or it was the same as Mount Jūdiyy or some mountain near Jūdiyy.

In the next step of his historical philological investigation, Farāhī focused on the Qur'an and the Bible. He started playing with the hypothetical question of whether we can link this mountain or mountains with the stories of Adam and Noah, and their progenies. Getting a clue from the Genesis story in the Bible that Adam and Eve covered their bodies with fig leaves and from the Qur'an where it mentioned Mount Jūdiyy in the story of Nūḥ's flood (or the Deluge),⁵⁷ Farāhī grew confident enough to affirm that *al-tīn* was the key mountain in this story, being either the same as Jūdiyy or at least closer to the latter. In a nutshell, for Farāhī, linguistic cues in Arabic poetry, the Qur'an, and the Bible all suggested they were alluding to the same mountain which was remembered as either *al-tīn* or *al-jūdiyy*. In order to further strengthen his exegetical position, Farāhī delved further into the Bible.

In one reference in the Old Testament, Farāhī came across something more substantial to weave into his interpretation of the sura. He contended that in this biblical verse, the references to places, despite their having an order different from what was mentioned in Q 95, was meant to serve the same divine argument as in Sūrat al-Tīn. The verse in the Bible runs as follows:

⁵⁷ The verse reads: Q 11:44: "Then it was said, 'Earth, swallow up your water, and sky, hold back,' and the water subsided, the command was fulfilled. The Ark settled on Mount Judi, and it was said, 'Gone are those evildoing people!'"

He said, “The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes.”⁵⁸

Farāhī now thought that the question could be investigated that how far these places were the same as he had identified in the case of Sūrat al-Tīn. He concluded his understanding in the form of the following points. It is clear or established that “Sinai” is the name of *ṭūr-i sīnīn*; Mount Paran (or Fārān in the Arabic Bible) is generally understood by pre-modern Muslim scholars as Jibāl Makka (the “Meccan mountains”) and that the Old Testament also lends support to this view. The last part of the biblical verse refers to what Farāhī explained in the *tafsīr* of Sūrat al-Ṣāffāt (Q 37)⁵⁹ as meaning the hills of Jerusalem which alluded to the mounts of *bayt al-muqaddas* (the “holy house,” “Jerusalem,” or the “Temple Mount”), which are referred to by the name of Mount Olives in the Gospels. After this, the only thing left to settle for Farāhī was the question of whether the word Seir in the above quote from Deuteronomy was similar to *al-tīn* or not. So far Farāhī had laboured hard to prove that *al-tīn*, instead of its popular understanding as signifying a fruit, was actually the name of a mountain, whose geography is alluded to in Arabic poetry and whose place in the divine scheme of reward and punishment is embedded in both the biblical and the Qur’anic narratives.

In the next phase of his philological search, Farāhī claimed, in the light of his biblical investigation, that “Seir” was the name of Jibāl Edom (“Mount Edom”), which was a place ruled by sultans and tribes and from whose occupation the biblical Israelites had been restrained by God. He explained that the name Edom is based on some earlier Semitic figure, °Ayiṣ bin Ishāq.

⁵⁸ Deuteronomy 33:2 (NIV).

⁵⁹ To Farāhī, that sura also deals with the same theme of divine reward and punishment as does Q 95.

He highlighted that Edom literally meant “reddish” and “wheatish” as Ibn Ishāq was believed to be. He mentioned that Jewish scholars were divided on its exact location: either south of Syria or north-east of biblical Israel.⁶⁰ Farāhī’s biblical investigation lent support to its location in the north-east of Israel which he thought was the same location of *al-tīn* or Mount Jūdiyy as he determined from Arabic poetry. He also recognized that other circulating traditions in vogue lent support to his theory. For instance, it was a popular view that the etymology or origin of the Hebrew word Edom alluded to reddishness. The same was true with the etymology of Adam; thus, it is plausible that the word Edom stemmed from the fact that it was the abode of Adam. Edom’s other name is “Seir” whose meaning is flood (*tūfān*) in Hebrew and thus it is quite possible that Jūdiyy acquired the name Seir and was the ancient abode of the progeny of Adam and Noah. He opined that there was no other explanation of Seir in the Old Testament. Thus, the resemblance among *al-tīn*, Seir, and Edom was highly probable. Farāhī finished his philological investigation with the characteristic Arabic idiom, *wa-Allāhu a‘lam* (“only God knows best”). In short, by solving the philological puzzle with a combination of method and imagination, he was able to support his viewpoint whose echoes were already there in the Muslim exegetical tradition.

In the case of the word, *al-zaytūn*, Farāhī’s route of philological investigation was essentially the same as it was in the case of *al-tīn*. He claimed that this was the name of a mountain where olives were abundant and thus, based on Arabs’ practices in the field of nomenclature, it became famous with this name. He contended that *al-zaytūn* in the Qur’an by all means was the same mountain on which Jesus Christ prayed many times, and this had been

⁶⁰ Here Farāhī attempted to link this geographical location as hinted at in the Bible with what he estimated from Arabic poetry.

mentioned in the Gospels, as in Luke 21:37⁶¹ and other places. He reminded the reader that the earliest exegetical reports in the Muslim tradition lent support to that understanding as well. As reported by Ibn Abbas, Ibn Ka°b, and al-Ṭabarī, it was identified as *bayt al-muqaddas*, and the Companion of the Prophet, Qatāda ibn al-Nu°mān, said that the Temple was situated on this mountain.

Farāhī elaborated that on this mountain God snatched the bestowed guardianship (*amāna*) of His law from *yahūd* (the “Jews”) and handed it to the other branch of Abraham’s family, that is, the progeny of his son, Ismā°īl (*banī Ismā°īl*) in Mecca. He explained that the event belonged to the last phases of Jesus’ life. Farāhī contended that if we read all the Gospels together, the matter became clear and the Qur’anic reference to Mount Olives in Sūrat al-Tīn made a perfect sense in this light.

For the other two words, *ṭūr sīnīn* and *balad al-amīn*, Farāhī saw himself in a very convenient situation to interpret. He understood *ṭūr sīnīn* as the place where God showered His blessings on an oppressed and subdued Israelite nation as He had promised their forefathers He would. God called Moses up the mountain to fulfil His promise that He had made with the pious forefathers of the Israelites, so that they would stand witness to other nations by following His law. In the case of *balad al-amīn*, Farāhī explained that it meant that God made Mecca a safe haven (*balad al-amīn*) after He had Abraham and Ismā°īl settle there.

Farāhī concluded his investigation of these four oaths by settling the difference in the order in which they appeared in the biblical verse in Deuteronomy and in Sūrat al-Tīn. He sought the basis for this interpretation within the internal logics of the two scriptures. In the case

⁶¹ In the Bible, the verse reads: “Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called the Mount of Olives.” (NIV)

of the Qur'an, he argued from the Qur'anic allusions which mentioned the resemblance between Adam (of *al-tīn*) and Jesus (of *al-zaytūn*) in terms of their creation, and between Moses (of Mount Sinai) and the Prophet Muḥammad (of *balad al-amīn*) for their all having the gift of the divine law. In the case of the Bible, Farāhī considered the order of the names of the mountains as based on harmony in their locations.

In the final analysis of Farāhī's interpretive technique, three things figure in prominently in his art of interpretation: philological investigation based on Arabic literature; consideration of early Muslim opinions for better understanding of the text; and philological investigation based on the semantics of the Bible and the Qur'an.⁶² If studied holistically, Farāhī's method manifests a stress on the single signification of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses, despite his acknowledging other possible, if not contradictory, meanings, as in Q 95:7 that we discussed above in the translation of his *tafsīr* portion. In addition, his overall method asked for a thorough engagement with, and not the dismissal of, the tradition as it had developed over the centuries, which is the topic of the next section.

British India and Farāhī's Quest for New Methodology

Readers of Farāhī's works have been fascinated by his radical but promising approach to the understanding of the Qur'an. For many modern educated Muslims, the Farāhī school stands as attractive enough to follow for it provides a hope to read the Qur'an confidently and systematically in the wake of the secular study of Islam and the Qur'an. At the same time, for a

⁶² In another study of the Farāhī school, I have highlighted another aspect of the interpretive technique of Farāhī and Iṣlāhī. I argued, based on a linguistic analysis, that the two exegetes painted their interpretive narrative of a sura on the canvas of the imagined life of the Prophet Muḥammad, that is, they connected a sura or a pair of suras with a particular phase of the Prophet's life. See Kamran Bashir, "Revisiting Modern Naẓm Approaches to the Qur'an: Iṣlāhī's Interpretation of Q. 107 and Q. 108 in his *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 17, no. 2 (June 2015): 47-74.

historian, his Qur'anic hermeneutics were deeply embedded in his own times. Below we investigate the context that provoked his specific thinking on the Qur'an and the larger project it entailed.

Farāhī's Naẓm Principle

We are now quite familiar with the overall context in which *naẓm* and *rabṭ* theories were developing in colonial India. In the case of Farāhī, he hardly came into any contact in writing with Europeans on the structure, style, or diction of the Qur'an. But there is no doubt that he was familiar with the larger criticism concerning the Qur'an in his times. His own introduction to his *tafsīr* noted on some occasions the challenge which Muslim scholars were facing due to this criticism, and as he noted, some of his contemporaries succumbed to the force of this criticism as well.⁶³ Moreover, in Nu^cmānī's person, he had somebody who was continuously informing him on what was happening in Europe in the field of Qur'anic studies. Nu^cmānī had even taken pains to have the German works of Goldziher and Nöldeke translated for him. Moreover, his essays revealed how very familiar he was with new Qur'an manuscript discoveries and the related speculations by Europeans on the early history of the collection and formation of the Qur'anic text. It was also Nu^cmānī to whom Farāhī probably sent for the first time his early pieces of Qur'anic exegesis based on his new theory of *naẓm* as their letters reveal. On reading his first exegetical piece, Nu^cmānī replied to Farāhī:

I have seen your [piece of *Tafsīr*] *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*. Though there is no doubt on [the quality of] your expression and style, I cannot give any opinion for the moment about your main goal or method. The kind of *rabṭ* you are suggesting [in the Qur'an] seems quite broad in its meanings...Another problem is that you only consider apparently connected verses; whereas *the objection is* that what comes in between connected things, [that is,] these [textual distractions] disrupt the whole sequence of verses and

⁶³ Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 17.

the intended message. There is a need to establish some kind of connection for such type of breaks [emphasis added].⁶⁴

In the quotation above, Nu[°]mānī was showing his initial reaction to Farāhī's first work, hinting in the process at the criticism of the Qur'an that was in the air of British India. Moreover, the link of Farāhī with Nu[°]mānī also encapsulated their direct or indirect concerns with what was happening on the European mainland in the study of the history of the Qur'an. All seemed to contribute to their unease with some of the early Muslim positions on the history of the Qur'an. Nu[°]mānī wrote on the eve of the discovery of some Qur'an fragments in 1914 by Dr. Alphonse Mingana that were claimed to be in disagreement with modern copies of the scripture:

In an article in the London Times dated 25 April 1914, it has been claimed that there have been found certain portions of the Qur'an which are different in text from the current Qur'an, and on whose authenticity one can rely more than on what we have in hand. The biggest objection that the Qur'an raised against Ahl al-Kitāb was their habit of tampering [with the scriptures] which has resulted in the differing shapes of Tawrāt and Injīl, and due to this reason, it has become difficult to decide if these divine scriptures are authentic even in comparison to earthly works.

[In the wake of the above Qur'anic criticism of Ahl al-Kitāb, it seems to Europeans] that the best way to answer an enemy [i.e. us as Muslims] is to reply in the same vein. Despite the fact that Christians raised all sorts of objections against the Qur'an, and even though many of the European Orientalists are in denial of the Qur'an's eloquence (*balāgha*), never has it been claimed before that there is another Qur'anic text existing that is different from the current text.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Shiblī Nu[°]mānī to Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, Hyderabad, 11 May 1903, in *Makātīb-i Shiblī*, vol. 2, 14.

⁶⁵ Nu[°]mānī, "Yūrap awr Qur'ān," 64 (see chap. 2, n. 17). The newspaper article reported that the Qur'an's fragments were in the shape of 23 leaves, included in the palimpsest purchased by Dr. Agnes Lewis in 1895 and was about to be published by the University of Cambridge Press. The newspaper article that Nu[°]mānī referred to is: "New Light on The Koran: Variants in the Text Discovered at Cambridge," *The Times* (London, England), Apr 25, 1914, <http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/ttda/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=TTDA&userGroupName=uvictoria&tabID=T003&docPage=article&searchType=BasicSearchForm&docId=CS201917081&type=multipage&contentSet=LTO&version=1.0>. The following lines at the end of the article betray the European element of the intellectual milieu that was confronting Muslim scholarship of the Qur'an during those time: "A hope has been raised that we may yet see a lamentable gap filled up in the history of one of the world's most famous books; and the beginning of a kind of criticism has been made which will bring us nearer to the real thoughts of the great Arabian Prophet."

The above points indicate that Farāhī's thought on *naẓm* and his view of the early history of the text of the Qur'an were evolving in a specific intellectual atmosphere.

Linked to this hermeneutical need to discover some kind of coherence in the Qur'an was the issue of social discord that Farāhī observed on religious issues among Muslim groups in colonial India. In this realm, Farāhī positively viewed the potential of the Qur'an to contribute to social harmony, a line of thought that was already in the making from an earlier period. Farāhī linked the Qur'an with the ideology of reform in Muslim society in British India and envisioned a future of social and intellectual unity among Muslim groups. Farāhī in many ways was the climax of the earlier evolving sentiment around the Qur'an when he wrote:

The very first thing that made me write on this topic [of *naẓm*] was the observation that much of the disagreements on understanding the Qur'an was due to the fact that people did not pay attention to *naẓm* [in their exegetical efforts]. Had the coherence of the discourse (*kalām*) been evident and the *ʿamūd* of a sura been clear to everybody, there would have been no difference of opinion on interpretation. [In such a situation] all would have been united under one flag and raised one voice in unison: Q 14:24: "like a good tree whose root is firm and whose branches are high in the sky". And every Muslim would have been adhering to one common thread as is said in the Qur'an Q3:103: "Hold fast to God's rope all together; do not split into factions."...[By contrast to this ideal situation], the fact of the matter is that every group is interpreting the Qur'an in its own way and is understanding the book by twisting its meaning according to its own wishes. And [in all these ramblings], the key of *naẓm* is entirely missing – a key that can reform the deviated and the heretic, and the crookedness of those who twist Qur'anic meaning.⁶⁶

The Qur'an and the Contemporary Intellectual Concerns

In addition to the contexts of his *naẓm* theory, his responses to the intellectual concerns of his age threw light on his overall vision of Muslim social and intellectual reform in which his Qur'anic thought had a special place. We can touch upon a few important aspects of his thought

⁶⁶ Farāhī, *Niẓām al-Qur'ān*, 17-18.

from this point of view. Farāhī penned his ideas on issues that were being debated in the public sphere. His stance on the nature of miracles is an interesting example.⁶⁷ His discussion on this topic pertained to the developing discourse on the prophetology of the Prophet Muḥammad in colonial India. In this regard, traditionalist scholars had delivered a verdict of *takfīr* (“excommunication”) on him; others had lumped him with Aḥmad Khān.⁶⁸ For his stance on the nature of miracles, Farāhī began by choosing the word *āya* (“sign”), instead of *muʿjiza* (“miracle” or “something against natural law”). He accepted *āya* as an evidence for *nabuwwa*,⁶⁹ and explained that the means of using an *āya* as an instance of *kharq-i ʿāda* (“breach of natural custom”) was employed in the career of a prophet only when all other ways of making the truth evident did not work. In such a case, this *āya* acted as *itmām al-ḥujja* (“consummation of evidence”). Farāhī made a survey of earlier opinions on the issue, including those of Ashaʿarites, Ibn Rushd, Walī Allāh, and Nuʿmānī. In a concluding vein, Farāhī thought that *āya* or *muʿjiza* should not necessarily be conceptualized as something against nature or not within the domain of cause and effect. It can be conceived as something beyond our current knowledge at a given point of time without being outside the realm of cause and effect. In the final analysis, Farāhī’s position was nowhere beyond the confines set forth by the Muslim scholarly tradition, if it was read outside the polemics of his age. Nonetheless, according to the standards of these polemics, he was certainly a “heretic” in the eyes of Deobandīs, just as Aḥmad Khān was. I would also contend, however, that reading his approach together with those of Aḥmad Khān and Deoband’s founder, Nānotwī, gives us the impression that there was certainly an underlying agreement

⁶⁷ Farāhī, *Al-Qāʾid fī ʿUyūn al-ʿĀqāʾid* (Azamgarh: Al-Dāʾira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2010), 171, 182, 179, 178, 177. Originally published in 1975 based on Farāhī’s manuscript.

⁶⁸ For the discussions on *fatwā* dealing with Farāhī’s *takfīr* (“excommunication”) and seeing him as inclining towards the ideas of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, see ʿAlim Qāsmī, “Muʿjiza kē bārē mēn,” 158-185.

⁶⁹ Farāhī, *ʿUyūn al-ʿĀqāʾid*, 56-68.

among these scholars on issues like understanding the nature of miracles. But the only apparent problem that did not allow them to agree with each other was the loss of religious authority, as the religious polemics of the era suggested. It is due to this problem that they were not finding any platform where they could initiate a dialogue to understand each other. By juxtaposing such diverse elements from Indian Muslim intellectual history under British rule, I will argue in Chapter Six that such polemics mistakenly led some historians of modern Islam to develop their conceptual frameworks in terms of typologies that are flawed when seen in historical perspective and studied in the light of what different scholars actually said on a particular religious issue. The end result of these constructed typologies is that they impede our understanding of different types of Muslim scholars (and their works) who were negotiating the world of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in multiple ways.

It is also interesting to note Farāhī's position on the debate in colonial India over translating the Qur'an. In the introduction to his Urdu translation of the last forty suras of the Qur'an, his starting point was his review of the popular translations of the Qur'an by Shāh ° Abd al-Qādir and Nadhīr Aḥmad.⁷⁰ To him, the former, despite its excellent qualities, was obsolete in terms of both its variety of Urdu and its degree of emotional appeal, and the latter was problematic for its obsession to render the Qur'an into the common man's Urdu idiom of Delhi. Farāhī recalled one of his interlocutors who complained in a vein of confusion after reading one such translation among a plethora of others by asking how the Qur'an could be treated as an elevated divine speech (after reading its meaning through these translations). To Farāhī, a better translation would be the one that was the closest to the meanings captured in the idiom of pre-

⁷⁰ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Tarjama-yi Qur'an-i Majīd: Ākhirī Chālīs Sūratēn* (Azamgarh: Al-Dā'ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 1990), 7-13. Originally published in 1976.

Islamic Arabic and not in the common man's language of the nineteenth-century Delhi. Moreover, for him, a translation should be in a diction not necessarily be accessible to a layman but should depict a register of eloquent literary language, which was the original Qur'anic style.

As hinted earlier, Farāhī's Qur'anic thought was part of his larger project to restructure the Muslim sciences in the light of the Qur'an and also in the light of tracing the early development of these sciences. In the following pages, we study the nature of his scholarship and the vision he held for the Muslim religious tradition, including the exegetical tradition. It is this vision that on occasions has led academic observers to characterize his school as a modernist group.

Farāhī's Project of Restructuring the Muslim Religious Sciences

Farāhī had a larger vision of restructuring the Muslim religious sciences, including Qur'anic exegesis, in the light of his assessment of their historical development and the factors that influenced them. In all of this restructuring project, Farāhī was deeply rooted in the Muslim tradition. His starting points in conceiving this new vision for the Muslim sciences were always his active engagement with key milestones in this centuries-old tradition. Quite in contrast to Farāhī's alleged features as a modernist, particularly given his seemingly "novel" idea of *nazm*, there are clear features in his exegetical thought that force readers to view him as a traditionalist scholar instead. Whatever his interpretive methods suggest, his emphasis remained on the sound traditions of exegesis. In theory, he never favoured *tafsīr bi-l-rā'y* ("exegesis based on personal opinion") if it was based on extra-Qur'anic and extra-traditional sources. In the case of traditional sources, he kept on laying emphasis on the sound traditions, which, in most cases, Farāhī saw in the earliest of the recorded sayings on the interpretations of the Qur'an, something

that traditionalist scholars like Thānawī also privileged.⁷¹ Moreover, Farāhī is also seen as a great admirer of Ibn Taymiyya, despite his disagreeing with him at times.⁷² What many of the academic observers have missed, as they did in the case of Aḥmad Khān, was Farāhī’s lively engagement with his scholarly tradition as evidenced in his marginalia on Ibn Taymiyya’s *rasā’il* (“essays”), an engagement that he really desired from his interlocutors as well. Thus, the key to properly understanding such enigmatic figures as Farāhī is to view them as scholars in search of a new synthesis, through re-investigating the tradition and actively engaging with it, and not through dismissing or ignoring it. The same is true when we read Farāhī’s marginalia on Suyūṭī’s *al-Itqān*, a classical work on the traditional sciences of the Qur’an. Nowhere can Farāhī be seen as dismissing these earlier works of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*; instead, he attempted to build his ideas on these works, even agreeing with them on a considerable number of occasions.⁷³ The same is true with his positions on the status of the Ḥadīth corpus and the resources of exegetical ḥadīth. If we ignore the intra-Sunni polemics of the colonial period, which on occasions labelled him a denier of ḥadīth traditions,⁷⁴ Farāhī’s position on the status of Ḥadīth in understanding the Qur’an and the larger Islamic worldview was far from being radical.

Let us briefly acquaint ourselves with his larger vision of the Qur’anic sciences, on which he only left a few fragmentary notes in the form of short sketches for future work. In the next chapter we shall further study his views as we compare and contrast evolving ideas on

⁷¹ Farāhī, *Nizām al-Qur’ān*, 28-30.

⁷² For some of the original *ḥawāshī* by Farāhī on the *rasā’il* (“essays”) of Ibn Taymiyya, see Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Iṣlāhī, “Allāma Ibn Taymiyya kē ba’ḍ Rasā’il par Mawlānā Farāhī kē Ḥawāshī,” in *Proceedings of Farāhī Seminar “Allama Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī: Ḥayāt wa Afkār”* (Azamgarh: Anjuman-i Ṭalaba-yi Qadīm Madrasat al-Iṣlāh, 1992), 186-222.

⁷³ Muḥammad Ajmal Iṣlāhī, “Mawlānā Farāhī kē Qalmī Ḥawāshī *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* par,” accessed January 10, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/56332979/Mawlana-Farahi-kay-Qalmi-Hawaashi-al-Itaqan-fi-Ulum-al-Qur-an-par>. The article is accessible via the site <https://www.hamid-uddin-farahi.org/>, a site dedicated to the works of Farāhī.

⁷⁴ For the polemical attacks on Farāhī for his positions on Ḥadīth and Sunna, see Mas’ūd, “Ḥadīth wa Sunnat kī Taḥqīq kā Farāhī Minhāj,” 223-225.

Qur'anic hermeneutics. As studied in his interpretation of Sūrat al-Tīn, Farāhī's views on the *nazm* of the Qur'an motivated him to study the Muslim scholarly tradition with a new lens. What his mortal existence made possible for him was to chart a program of fresh reading and understanding of the development of this tradition. This new reading was not meant to come to an agreement with modernity, as academic observers might understand it, but to search for the origins from which all the disciplines of the Islamic sciences had sprung. In this new reading, the investigations of the Islamic sciences were conceived in their relationships with the Qur'an, that is, with how the understanding of the Qur'an was enhanced or suffered during the process of the evolution of Islamic thought, such as in the case of the development of classical Arabic rhetoric. In the case of the Qur'an, Farāhī conceived his new project along two lines in addition to writing a full commentary on the Qur'an. The first branch of this project envisaged proposed research works on the established text of the Qur'an which Farāhī called *ẓāhir al-Qur'ān* ("Qur'anic appearances"). In this case, he planned five works, for whose further development he left with his students some works in both printed and manuscript form. The second branch of his project conceived seven works around the theme of *ʿulūm wa maʿārif* ("special sciences") of the Qur'an.⁷⁵ Farāhī's writings present before us a comprehensive program of assessing the Muslim intellectual tradition for better understanding and synthesis, without foregoing any so-called "orthodoxy" and "heresy" in its history. Two important illustrations from Farāhī's larger work can give us an idea of what Farāhī had in mind when he was conceiving a new vision for the Muslim sciences, including the Qur'anic sciences.

⁷⁵ The first branch of his project on the Qur'an included the works: *Mufradāt al-Qur'ān*; *Asālib al-Qur'ān*; *Al-Takmil fī Uṣūl al-Tāʾwīl*; *Dalāʾil al-Niẓām*; *Tāʾrīkh al-Qur'ān*. The second branch envisaged *Ḥikmat al-Qur'ān*; *Ḥujuj al-Qur'ān*; *Al-Qāʾid fī ʿUyūn al-ʿAqāʾid*; *Al-Rāʾy al-Ṣaḥīḥ fī man huwa al-Dhabīḥ*; *Aḥkām al-Uṣūl*; *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*; *Al-Rasūkh fī Maʿrifat al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*. For the details of these works, see Sharfuddīn, *Dhikr-i Farāhī*, 675-785.

At the time when Farāhī was working on the Qur'an and engaged in his larger project of the restructuring of the Muslim sciences, thinking about classical Arabic rhetoric and earlier Arabic lexicography on new lines was something beyond question. It was largely settled that whatever had been said and recorded on these disciplines was all that should be drawn upon to explain the complexities of Qur'anic diction (through the classical Arabic rhetoric) and vocabulary (based on the earlier developed Arabic lexicon). In this milieu, Farāhī, with his background of training under Sahāranpūrī, dared, perhaps for the first time after centuries, to trace the historical development of these areas of Arabic linguistics in order to locate the Qur'an again in the pre-Islamic environment that had been its original world according to the Muslim tradition. In the case of Arabic rhetoric, Farāhī in his *Jamharat al-Balāgha* highlighted that Arabic rhetoric owed its essential development mainly to Aristotle whose ideas were based fundamentally on the Greek language and literature.⁷⁶ By contrast, his own study of the Qur'an and pre-Islamic Arabic literature found some of the principles of classical Arabic rhetoric to be either flawed or insufficient. Whether he was right or not in his approach is a separate question, but how he was thinking is important to know if we are to understand the historical milieu. In short, his inquisitive and literary mind could not reconcile the Qur'an with previous thought on Arabic rhetoric. The "established" dictates of Arabic rhetoric seemed to him deficient for fully appreciating the literary qualities and diction of the Qur'an.

Related to the above challenge, which Farāhī felt, was the issue of the development of the Arabic lexicon in its earlier phases. Farāhī pointed out that despite the invaluable work done by early and medieval lexicographers to record the meanings of Arabic words, that work was

⁷⁶ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, *Jamharat al-Balāgha* (Azamgarh: Maṭba' Ma'ārif, 1941). It was started publishing in a monthly journal in 1905.

essentially a human product and thus, could be flawed on some occasions. What Farāhī stressed was that when some established lexical meaning did not make sense in the context of Qur’anic verses and their literary diction, the meaning of the Qur’anic word in question could be re-checked against pre-Islamic Arabic literature to see its use and other possible meanings. In order to clarify the point, he highlighted that early Arabic lexicographers, such as al-Farāhīdī (d. 791), themselves took Qur’an and pre-Islamic Arabic literature as the basis of their work in order to establish the meaning of Arabic words in their lexicons. Thus, we too, as modern readers of the Qur’an, might look into the earliest of Arabic literary works to re-investigate Qur’anic meanings. Q 87:5 presented the representative example of what Farāhī wanted to urge on his readers. The first five verses of Sūrat al-A[°]lā (Q 87) read as follows:

1 [Prophet], glorify the name of your Lord the Most High, 2 who created [all things] in due proportion; 3 who determined their destinies and guided them; 4 who brought out the green pasture 5 then made it dark debris.

In general, pre-modern and modern commentators, including Thānawī, read the fifth verse 5 similarly to the above reading in English. By contrast, Farāhī’s sensibility for Arabic literary qualities and rhetoric felt some unease with the natural flow of the imagery, that is from “a green and luscious” pasture to, all of a sudden, “dark debris” (*ghuthā’an aḥwā*). He remained dissatisfied for years about the conventional interpretation of *ghuthā’an aḥwā* until he found specimens of another usage of the words in pre-Islamic poetry. He recorded his investigations of the words in his important work, *Mufradāt al-Qur’ān*,⁷⁷ a work that dealt with the investigation of the meanings of selected vocabulary of the Qur’an. He then concluded that the verses 4-5 should be read as: “Who brought forth vegetation and made it lush green (*ghuthā’an aḥwā*).”

⁷⁷ Farāhī, *Mufradāt al-Qur’ān*, 229-231.

Thus, in Farāhī's understanding, the meaning of *ghuthā'an aḥwā* in Q 87:5 was opposite of what had been understood conventionally. In sum, Farāhī was re-investigating some of the very earliest moments of the development of the Arabic lexicon. His legacy in the post-colonial period bore witness to the fact that he was not whimsical in his claims, for later generations of exegetes inspired by him developed these lines of lexicographical inquiry to further substantiate his ideas. It was due to such innovative approaches to the Qur'anic sciences and the Muslim scholarly tradition that his school came to attract secular Qur'anic interpreters in the academy. They considered him as contributing to the secular field of Qur'anic studies, transcending, thereby, the image of a religious scholar having merely a religious agenda of reform.

The Impact of Farāhī's Qur'an Project

Farāhī's character as a Muslim scholar and his pioneering work seem to challenge the ways in which we have been thinking about modern intellectuals in colonial India. In his person and thought, we can discern certain elements that are crucial to understanding him as a religious thinker. He was rethinking the interpretation of the Qur'an by tracing the origins of the Muslim religious sciences. This did not illustrate a disconnect with the Muslim intellectual tradition but a new way of conceiving a relationship with it, as will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

Farāhī was also seen as involved in institution making, indirectly in Nadwat al-[°]Ulamā[°], and directly in the Dār al-[°]Ulūm at Hyderabad and Madrasat al-Iṣlāḥ in Azamgarh. He also aspired for the revival of the lost glory of Islam in both intellectual and political terms, and this had an impact on his decision to write in Arabic for the larger global Muslim scholarly community. In addition, Farāhī's person and his writings in some ways served as clues to some of the hidden aspects of Muslim scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And

here lies the enigma of his impact and legacy. Amidst a strife-ridden milieu marked by both inter-faith and intra-faith rivalries, we find him to be one of a hidden breed of Muslim scholars who were writing for larger motives. The context of rivalries did have an influence on such scholars, but they were less interested in winning and settling scores in this intellectual and religious struggle. His person also hinted at some aspects of an old tradition of co-existence among religious scholars, poets, and other intellectuals in pre-Mutiny India, where the religious Āzurdah had no problem in developing a close relationship with the not-very-religious Ghālib. In Farāhī's career, we see a similar pattern wherein intellectuals of diverse orientations had no problem consulting or making friends with him. He was at ease with or admired by the Deobandī Manāzir Aḥsan Gilānī (1892-1956), Thānawī's devotee Daryābādī, Āzād, and the future Islamist Abū al-A°lā Mawdūdī. Moreover, his career in Qur'anic scholarship also alludes to the hidden ways in which the Qur'an had been studied, such as in Delhi literary circles where the scripture was yet to acquire the form of a new instrumental means to attain religious and political ends and to construct religious authority. I think that, although the true impact of his Qur'anic thought bore its real fruits in the post-independence period, Farāhī's true appeal was in his stress on studying the formation of the Muslim intellectual tradition through a systematic and sophisticated academic procedure. This stress on developing a systematic procedure was ultimately the reason why many educated people drew themselves closer to his person in his own times or to his thought after his death.

Chapter Six

Post-1857 Qur'anic Hermeneutics Principles, Ideas, and Trends

There are two main aims of this chapter. First, it will offer a synthesis of Qur'anic hermeneutics as it evolved after 1857. It will compare and contrast between the works of the three scholars studied in the previous chapters along with some additional works on the Qur'an written during the period under study. Second, the chapter will summarize and conclude on the ancillary question of how Muslim scholars were viewing and assessing their intellectual tradition in general and the exegetical tradition in particular. It will analyze how different scholars were conceiving their relationship with their intellectual heritage in terms of their continuity or discontinuity with it. This will be done by engaging with our current understanding of the nature of Muslim scholarship as it was evolving in British India.

In addition to the three key scholars, there were many notable contributors to the evolving Qur'anic hermeneutics in British India. While synthesizing principles, ideas, and trends related to Qur'anic interpretation, the chapter will take into its purview their writings as well. As we discussed in the three case studies, there were multiple contexts out of which Qur'anic thought was originating. We can organize these works, for practical purposes, in terms of two contexts from which they made their appearance. First, there were works of Qur'anic exegesis and hermeneutics penned by those who had some form of Sunni sectarian affiliation. In most of these cases, authors of these writings belonged to some kind of institutional setting. Here the identification of these institutional settings is based on the surviving works of Qur'an commentaries as noted by a key historian of this literature in South Asia, Ṣāliḥā °Abd al-Ḥakīm, whose work I discussed in Chapter One. The choice of these works is also guided to some extent

by the apparent influence of these works in colonial India. Four affiliations emerge more conspicuously in comparison to others: the Dār al-‘Ulūm of Deoband; the Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jamā‘at (the Barēlwī school); the Ahl-i Ḥadīth school; and the intellectual tradition of Farangī Maḥall. In the following, the works originating from these contexts are introduced in brief before we discuss some of the key ideas originating with them together with those that emanated from the three case studies.

In the case of Deoband, in addition to Thānawī, the period under examination featured two main voices on Qur’anic hermeneutics. The first was one of the earliest students of the Deoband seminary, Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan (1851-1920), a teacher of Thānawī.¹ Remembered with the honorific title of *Shaykh al-Hind*, al-Ḥasan started teaching at Deoband before he even graduated from the seminary, and he was instrumental in training the next generations of the ‘*ulamā*’. For his anti-British activities, he was imprisoned in Malta where he wrote his Urdu translation of the Qur’an and some unfinished exegetical glosses. He too, like Thānawī, considered the publishing of “inauthentic” Urdu translations of the Qur’an as the main reason for his decision to give another rendering of the Qur’an into Urdu.² Like Thānawī, he took Shāh ‘Abd al-Qādir’s work of the late eighteenth century as his main inspiration and imagined his own work as transforming ‘Abd al-Qādir’s *tarjama* into a familiar Urdu idiom of his time. He noted that in the wake of Thānawī’s already available work, he found no motivation to write

¹ Al-Ḥasan was born in Barēlī in the United Provinces of British India. In addition to his teaching at Deoband, he formed the organization, Jam‘iat al-Anṣār, with ‘Ubayd Allāh Sindhī to pursue anti-British activities. He was sent to prison in Malta for his activities where he wrote in 1919 his translation of the Qur’an, with incomplete exegetical glosses. For his biography, see Muḥammad Akbar Shāh Bukhārī, *Pachās Jalīl al-Qadar ‘Ulamā’* (Lahore: Al-Mīzān, 2006), 36-39.

² See Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan, introduction to *Tafsīr-i ‘Uthmānī*, by Shabbīr Aḥmad ‘Uthmānī, vol. 1 (Karachi: Dār al-Ishā‘at, 2007), 11-12. The exegetical glosses from Q 1 to Q 4 were written by al-Ḥasan. The original title of al-Ḥasan’s work was *Muḍīḥ-i Furqān-i Ḥamīd*. Later his work became part of *Tafsīr-i ‘Uthmānī*.

except to fulfill the requests of his admirers.³ The second notable exegete of the Qur'an in the Deoband tradition was Shabbir Ahmad Uthmānī (1887-1949) who was a student of al-Ḥasan.⁴ Uthmānī fulfilled the unfinished project of his teacher. Using al-Ḥasan's translation and exegetical glosses, he wrote the famous Qur'an commentary entitled *Tafsīr-i Uthmānī*.⁵

In the case of the Barēlwī school, we see the same trend as manifested in the Deoband scholarship in terms of the development of a genealogy of works on the Qur'an. The founder of the school and the movement that it launched was Raḍā Khān who did not leave any commentary of the Qur'an, apart from the occasional exegetical opinions found in his voluminous *fatāwā*.⁶ He wrote a famous Urdu translation of the Qur'an, *Kanz al-Īmān*, in 1912, which was glossed under the title *Khazā'in al-ʿIrfān* by his close disciple and one of the bearers of his message, Naʿīm al-Dīn Murādābādī (1883-1948).⁷

³ Al-Ḥasan described another work of translation and exegesis, *Tarjama-yi Qurʾān*, as noteworthy, by a notable traditionalist scholar, ʿĀshiq Ilāhī Mīrathī. The work was published in 1902.

⁴ Uthmānī graduated from Deoband in 1908, and later taught at the seminary. He supported the freedom movement for Pakistan led by the All India Muslim League and participated in this struggle through the platform of Jamʿiyyat ʿUlamāʾ-yi Islām. Other than his Qur'an commentary, which was completed in 1932, one of Uthmānī's notable works was his *sharḥ* ("explanation" or "commentary") of one of the canonical Ḥadīth collections, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. For his biographical details, see Bukhārī, *Pachās ʿUlamāʾ*, 66-72.

⁵ In addition to al-Ḥasan and Uthmānī, there were other notable scholars associated with Deoband in the first half of the twentieth century from the period under study whose writings hinted at the nature of issues surrounding the interpretation of the Qur'an. These included: 1) Zafar Ahmad Uthmānī (1892-1974), who wrote *Aḥkām al-Qurʾān*, a treatise on the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses dealing with legal issues and which he attributed to Thānawī for the origin of the ideas mentioned in it. He also wrote a work of *fiqh* entitled *Iʿlā al-Sunan* in which he gathered ḥadīths supporting Ḥanafī legal positions. 2) Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī (1875-1933), an expert in Ḥadīth studies, who wrote a treatise entitled *Mushkilāt al-Qurʾān*, dealing with philological inquiry of the selected vocabulary and verses of the Qur'an. Kashmīrī was a reputed teacher in the history of Deoband seminary. He was also involved in intellectual debates with Deoband scholars on the issue of reform in Islamic law, a characteristic of his career that led Muhammad Qasim Zaman to call him an "internal critic" of traditionalist schools. Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 24-28 (see chap. 2, n. 105).

⁶ For his biographical details, see Usha Sanyal, *Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi: In the Path of the Prophet* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

⁷ Ahmad Raḍā Khān and Naʿīm al-Dīn Murādābādī, *Khazā'in al-ʿIrfān* (Lahore: Majlis al-Madina al-ʿIlmiyya, 2011). Originally published in 1912. Born in Murādābād in North India, Murādābādī was a strong adherent to the Barēlwī cause. He formed a leading madrasa in Murādābād under the name Jamīʿa Naʿīmiyya in 1910. He was prominent in inter-faith disputations, such as against Hindus, and participated in the movement for the formation of Pakistan. Two notable disciples of Murādābādī, who wrote Qur'an commentaries and who had personal relationships with

The third important Sunni school was the Ahl-i Ḥadīth.⁸ Two names stood out there in the field of Qur'anic interpretation. One was Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, the prince of the state of Bhopal and the author of the Arabic *tafsīr* entitled *Faḥ al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qur'ān* and of a partial Urdu Qur'an commentary, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*.⁹ While it may be convenient for practical purposes to place his commentary under the Ahl-i Ḥadīth label as he identified himself with this appellation, Ḥasan Khān's work on the Islamic sciences, including Qur'anic studies, was complex and challenged categorizations based on sectarian affiliations and fluid groups. In terms of his exegetical works, he can be seen, as some secondary studies argue, both as a continuation of the pre-modern *tafsīr* tradition and also as resembling some of the authors of nineteenth-century Arabic works of Qur'an commentary, such as al-Shawkānī (d. 1839), a Yemeni scholar.¹⁰ In this chapter, I have focused especially on his important work on Qur'anic hermeneutics, *Al-Iksīr fī 'Uṣūl al-Tafsīr*, in order to bring his insights within our purview and analysis.¹¹ A second important name in the Ahl-i Ḥadīth group is of Thānā' Allāh Amrītsarī

Raḍā Khān, included Aḥmad Yār Khān (1906-1971) and Abu al-Ḥasanāt (1896-1961). Yār Khān wrote exegetical glosses entitled *Nūr al-'Irfān* on the translation of Raḍā Khān. Al-Ḥasanāt penned a commentary under the title *Tafsīr al-Ḥasanāt*.

⁸ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth as a group was not exactly comparable to the other two schools in terms of their concrete foundations and notable personalities. At times, the group seemed to function more as label than as a group having some kind of centralized authority. In terms of doctrine and methodology to understand Islam, it was often grouped with the school of Ibn Wahhāb (d. 1792). How its institutional identity developed over time is a question to investigate elsewhere.

⁹ Born in Qannauj in North India, Ḥasan Khān first studied at home and then in Delhi, where he experienced the tutelage of Ṣadr al-Dīn Āzurdah. Later he married the ruler of the princely state of Bhopal, Shāh Jahān Bēgam (d. 1901). Along with his political responsibilities, Ḥasan Khān actively pursued a career in religious writing, mostly in Arabic and Persian, and patronized the Arab scholars residing in his state. For his biography, see Raḍīya Ḥāmid, *Nawāb Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān* (Bhopal: Published privately by the author, 1983). For his cosmopolitan connections, see Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 267-330.

¹⁰ For an analysis of his *tafsīr*, see Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ḥanṭūr, *Manhaj Ṣiddīq Khān fī Tafsīr Faḥ al-Bayān* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 1998). For the modern edition of his Urdu commentary, see Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān bi-Laṭā'if al-Bayān* (Lahore: Maktaba Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth, n.d.). He also wrote a famous work, *Nīl al-Marām min Tafsīr Āyāt al-Aḥkām*, dealing with the interpretation of Qur'anic verses related to legal issues.

¹¹ Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, "Al-Iksīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr," in *Majmū'a 'Ulūm-i Qur'ān*, eds. and trans. 'Abd Allāh Salīm and Shāhid Maḥmūd (Gujranwala: Dār Abī al-Ṭayyib, 2014), 523-907. Originally written in Persian and published in 1874.

(1868-1948), who was very active in the context of disputations with non-Muslims. He wrote an Urdu commentary of the Qur'an, *Tafsīr-i Thanāʾī*,¹² and an Arabic exegetical work under the title *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān bi-Kalām al-Raḥmān*.¹³ His Urdu commentary was especially aimed at dismissing positions deemed heretical such as those of Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and proponents of the Aḥmadiyya movement. In addition, his work especially focused on issues of the interpretation of the Qur'an which were the subject of inter-faith controversies.¹⁴

Within this group of authors manifesting Sunni sectarian affiliations, we can note some important authors who were not clearly associated with one particular group. Their careers manifested their educational and activist endeavours in mixed settings but their works on the Qur'an remain important in any history of *tafsīr* works and Qur'anic hermeneutics in modern India. The first is Amīr °Alī Malihābādī (1858-1919) who left an eight-volume Urdu Qur'an commentary entitled *Tafsīr Mawāhib al-Raḥmān*.¹⁵ Another name in this category is of Abū Muḥammad °Abd al-Ḥaqq Ḥaqqānī (d. 1916) who was well received in traditionalist circles and was active in inter-faith disputations. Focusing on the rebuttal of the commentators on the

¹² Born in Amritsar in the Punjab, Amritsarī's career resists any attempt to categorize him under a single ascribed group such as the Ahl-i Ḥadīth or the Deoband school. Although he ultimately came to be attached with the Jam'iat Ahl-i Ḥadīth formed in the early twentieth century, his intellectual formation was complex. He studied both under the famous Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar, Nadhīr Ḥusayn Dihlawī (1805-1902), and at Deobandī madrasas in Deoband and Sahāranpūr. He also spent time at Kanpur for his training in *ma'qūlāt*. In addition, Amritsarī's fame also rested on his apparently triumphant engagements in *munāzarāt*, mostly in Punjab areas, where reports described his performances as noteworthy. For his Urdu *tafsīr*, see Thanāʾī Allāh Amritsarī, *Tafsīr-i Thanāʾī*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Maktaba-yi Quddūsiyya, 2002). Originally published in seven volumes between 1895-1927. For his biography, see °Abd al-Majīd Khādīm, *Sīra Thanāʾī* (Lahore: Maktaba Quddūsiyya, 1989).

¹³ Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 117-119.

¹⁴ Another important Ahl-i Ḥadīth work we should keep sight of is by Iḥtishām al-Dīn Murādābādī entitled *Tafsīr Iksīr-i A'zam* that was published between 1885 to 1898 and apparently stressed more on *tafsīr* based on earlier exegetical traditions. The exegete is also remembered for his criticism directed towards Shi'as in colonial India. See Sharf al-Dīn, *Qurʾān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 213-214 (see chap. 1, n. 28).

¹⁵ Amīr °Alī Malihābādī, *Tafsīr Mawāhib al-Raḥmān*, 8 vols. (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, ca. 1925). Originally published in 1896. Born in Malihābād in the United Provinces, Malihābādī completed his earlier studies in the traditional Islamic sciences in a madrasa in his hometown. Later he came to Delhi to pursue Ḥadīth studies with Nadhīr Ḥusayn. For many years he worked in Naval Kishore Press, also taught at Nadwat al-°Ulamāʾ in Lucknow and Madrasa °Āliyya in Calcutta.

Qur'an whom he perceived as heretical, including Aḥmad Khān, Ḥaqqānī penned a famous commentary, *Fath al-Mannān musammā bi-Tafsīr-i Ḥaqqānī*, which has remained in print to the present times.¹⁶ We can also note here a *tafsīr* in the tradition of Farangī Maḥall of Lucknow by °Abd al-Bārī (d. 1886) who wrote a commentary on the Qur'an entitled *Alṭāf al-Raḥmān bi-Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, which was mostly based on his students' notes from his lectures.¹⁷ Within the above-mentioned flexible category, we may place the work of Abū al-Kalām Āzād (1888-1956),¹⁸ who was informally associated with the Nadwat al-°Ulamā° through his long friendship with Shiblī Nu°mānī. He completed his Urdu Qur'an commentary, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, in 1931.¹⁹

The second major category under which we can place important works of Qur'anic commentary and hermeneutics consists of those coming from the regional context of the Punjab. Many authors from this setting, though born and raised in areas of the Punjab, spent a considerable amount of time in Delhi for their learning in the traditional Islamic sciences. Many of them were received as members of one or another of the Sunni schools mentioned above. Their importance stems from the impact on the masses of their ideas, which sprang up in the larger context of British India, for example, in the contexts of inter-faith disputations and

¹⁶ °Abd al-Ḥaqq Ḥaqqānī, *Tafsīr Fath al-Mannān*, 3 vols. (Karachi: Kutub Khāna Mīr Muḥammad, n.d.). Originally published in eight volumes between 1887 and 1900.

¹⁷ °Abd al-Bārī Farangī Maḥallī, *Alṭāf al-Raḥmān bi-Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Lucknow: Nāmī Press, 1925).

¹⁸ Born in Mecca and later migrated to Calcutta with his family, Āzād flourished in multiple contexts. He acquired education in both the traditional Islamic sciences, including training in the Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages, and modern education in English. He actively participated in politics through the platform of the All India National Congress. He wrote on diverse topics as an editor and writer in newspapers and magazines.

¹⁹ Abū al-Kalām Āzād, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, 3 vols. (Lahore: Islāmī Akādāmī, n.d.). Originally published ca. 1931. For his life and works, see Ian Henderson Douglas, *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography*, ed. Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988). On his *tafsīr*, see J.M.S. Baljon, "A Modern Urdu Tafsir," *Die Welt des Islams* 2, no. 2 (1952): 95-107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1569042>. For a recent work on Āzād, see Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, *Maulana Azad, Islam and the Indian National Movement* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

movements against the British rule. They were also actively participating in larger debates around the interpretation of the Qur'an. We can understand their works within some sub-categories.

Some authors were part of or founders of different movements in which the Qur'an was the driving force behind their ideologies and larger vision. One of these was °Ināyat Allāh Khān Mashriqī (1888-1963) who was the founder of the Khāksār Taḥrīk, a movement aimed at the revival of Muslims as a nation by interpreting Islam and the Qur'anic message in social terms. Mashriqī interpreted Islamic teaching as directed towards building a cohesive society. Conceiving a commentary unconventional in form, Mashriqī wrote his exegetical and hermeneutical treatise *Tadhkira* in two volumes which discussed issues of how to understand the Qur'an and what role it should play in the larger vision of Muslim community.²⁰ Another important name that can be discussed in this category is of °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī (1872-1948), who was a Sikh convert to Islam. Admired in traditionalist circles, Sindhī was a student of al-Ḥasan of Deoband.²¹ He left us a few important works on the Qur'an that encapsulated his religious worldviews.²² Attached to Sindhī was his son-in-law, Aḥmad °Alī Lāhorī (1887-1964). Born in Gujranwala in the Punjab, Lāhorī is also considered as an important Deobandī luminary,

²⁰ °Ināyat Allāh Mashriqī, *Tadhkira*, 2 vols. (Lahore: Al-Fayṣal, n.d.). On his social and political activism, see Smith, *Islām in India*, 235-245 (see Introduction, n. 41).

²¹ Born in the Punjab, Sindhī spent his life in multiple contexts that spanned his educational endeavours at Deoband, establishing madrasas in Sindh, and participating in anti-British activities from global platforms in Afghanistan. He stayed in the Hijaz for more than a decade, before finally returning to India for good.

²² °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī, *Qur'ān-i Karīm kā Muṭāli'a kaysē kiyā jā'ē* (Lahore: Ḥikmat-i Qur'ān Institute, n.d.). Originally written in 1914. Also see °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī, *Qur'ānī Shu'ūr-i Inqilāb* (Lahore: Makkī Dār al-Kutub, 1997); °Ubayd Allāh Sindhī, *Ilhām al-Raḥmān fī Tafṣīr al-Qur'ān* (Multan: Idāra-yi Bayt al-Ḥikma, n.d.); Bashīr Aḥmad Ludhayānwī et al, eds., *Majmū'a-yi Tafṣīr-i Imām Sindhī* (Karachi: Ḥikmat-i Qur'ān Institute, 2009). For his brief biography and activism within the British and Ottoman Empires, see Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 1-44. For an academic work on his Qur'anic hermeneutics, see SherAli Tareen, "Revolutionary Hermeneutics: Translating the Qur'an as a Manifesto for Revolution," *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 3, no. 1-2 (2017): 1-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20566093.2017.1286750>.

despite the fact that his career was informed more by his father-in-law than by his association with Deoband. He left us an important work of Qur'an commentary under the title *Qur'ān-i 'Azīz*, which interpreted the Qur'an based on *rabf*.²³

We can mention in this second category two other important names as well: Muḥammad 'Alī (1874-1951) and 'Abd Allāh Chakṛālwī (d. 1916). Muḥammad 'Alī belonged to the Aḥmadiyya movement and was an active associate of the founder of this religious sect, Ghulām Aḥmad of Qadiyān. He wrote Qur'an commentaries in both English and Urdu that dealt with many of the important issues of Qur'anic hermeneutics of the time.²⁴ In the case of Chakṛālwī, his work, *Tarjamāt al-Qur'ān bi-Āyāt al-Furqān*, stood on the extreme end of a current of thought that had been steadily developing from the period after the Mutiny regarding the status of Ḥadīth in understanding Islam and its place in the interpretation of the Qur'an.²⁵ Chakṛālwī, as a leading voice in the Ahl al-Qur'an movements in the Punjab,²⁶ considered the Qur'an as the

²³ Aḥmad 'Alī Lāhorī, *Qur'ān-i 'Azīz*, (Lahore: Pāk Company, 2000).

²⁴ The exegete is also mentioned in the literature with the name Muḥammad 'Alī Lāhorī. For his Urdu commentary published between 1922 and 1924, see Muḥammad 'Alī, *Tafsīr Bayān al-Qur'ān*, 2 vols. (Lahore: Aḥmadiyya Anjuman-i Ishā'at-i Islām, 1980). He also wrote a commentary on the Qur'an in English. Muḥammad 'Alī, *The Holy Qur'ān: Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary*, 6th ed. (Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman-i Ishā'at-i Islam, 1973). The first edition was published in 1917. The inclusion of an Aḥmadī work in this study is driven by the fact that the group was originally considered a Muslim "heretic" group rather than a non-Muslim group in colonial India. Aḥmadīs were regarded as a heretic group within Sunni Islam and not as Shi'a. The first attempt to declare them non-Muslim was in the context of a family law in the princely state of Bahawalpur in 1935. Later they were declared non-Muslims in 1974 in the independent state of Pakistan. See Ali Usman Qasmi, *The Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014).

²⁵ 'Abd Allāh Chakṛālwī, *Tarjamāt al-Qur'ān bi-Āyāt al-Furqān* (Lahore: Sir Sayyid Research Academy, 2007). Originally published in 1908. For an academic work on Chakṛālwī's religious activism, see Ali Usman Qasmi, *Questioning the Authority of the Past: The Ahl al-Qur'an Movements in the Punjab* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Qasmi has defined the Ahl al-Qur'an movements as "a disparate set of movements and ideologues – dating from late nineteenth century onwards in South Asia – associated with those who uphold the Quran as the only sacred text which Muslims need to follow in matters of their belief and practices." Qasmi, *Ahl al-Qur'an Movements*, 2.

only legitimate source of Islam and wrote his commentary, as he claimed, without the aid of any extra-Qur'anic sources.

Having briefly acquainted ourselves with this important body of works, in addition to the three case studies, we can now move to synthesize what we have learned so far and identify some major issues, ideas, and trends in the realm of Qur'anic hermeneutics that developed near the end of the colonial period in India. The additional works mentioned above will remain in my purview and analysis, particularly their statements on the principles of exegesis. This will further add to and substantiate what we have investigated in the previous chapters. Moreover, the captions below reflect ideas, trends, and principles under which we can find commonalities and differences in Muslim scholarly positions on an evolutionary trajectory.

Qur'anic Hermeneutics:

Emerging Views on the Collection of the Qur'an

One of the overarching issues related to the understanding of the Qur'an was how Muslim scholars viewed the composition of their scripture. Any specific view of the history of this composition was bound to have an influence on its interpretation. Among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship in colonial India, approaches to interpreting the Qur'an as a "meaningful" book were directly linked with the scholarly views on how the Qur'an came into being in the formative period of Islamic history. The underlying assumption in Muslim minds seemed to be the idea that for the Qur'an to have a clear, well-connected structure of chapters and their verses, its history should reveal an intelligent mind composing and transferring it to posterity. The core historical sources to construct the history of the composition of the Qur'an were the traditions ascribed to the early caliphs as recorded in Muslim sources. While these traditions did give some information about how the Qur'an was collected and finally came into

the shape in which Muslims have it now, these sources did not provide a detailed narrative account of this collection. Moreover, if all traditions, including those attributed to the Prophet himself, were seen together, there was the possibility to arrive at multiple interpretations of these traditional narratives. Pre-modern Muslim exegetes apparently did not find any need to interpret these traditions to arrive at a detailed account. Therefore, these traditions, in addition to their place in books of Ḥadīth, were often part of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* works, such as al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Itqān*. It was only in the wake of non-Muslim, especially Christian, criticism of the Qur’an in the nineteenth century that Muslim scholars felt the need to come up with a detailed amplified narrative of the traditions regarding the collection of the Qur’an from the time of the Prophet down to Caliph ‘Uthmān (r. 644-656 CE) and sometimes beyond. For European readers of the Qur’an in colonial India, the history of the collection of Muslim scripture raised doubts in their minds on the integrity of this collection and composition process in the first century of Islam. Muslim traditional reporting of this historical process gave non-Muslim readers an impression that the Prophet perhaps left the scripture scattered here and there, in different forms, including some parts of it in the memories of its reciters. In the later stages, the first Caliph Abū Bakr and then the third Caliph ‘Uthmān embraced the responsibility to establish the text, by appointing a commission, to collect all the pieces and give these materials a canonical arrangement. In short, for Europeans, the very “disjointed” nature of Qur’anic verses was the product of the problematic history of its collection and arrangement.

Despite these doubts, nurtured and spread by European scholarship, Muslim scholars in colonial India continued to dismiss these non-Muslim positions and argued for the integrity of this collection and arrangement. Many of them argued that the Qur’an was left intact by the Prophet himself in the form in which Muslims have it now, and the later caliphal efforts were

only meant to safeguard it from new potential hazards. From the latter half of the nineteenth century in colonial India, there was a consistent resistance to the pre-modern idea of the Qur'an having been collected later in the early caliphate. Many of the commentators viewed the collection of the Qur'an and its arrangement as something that had been done by the Prophet himself. Scholars streamlined and stabilized the apparent contradictions in the reported traditions on the collections of the Qur'an under the early caliphs. Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī had somewhat similar positions on the issue; one difference between them was related to the degree of the systematic collection that the Qur'an underwent. The difference between them also owed to the differences in the larger focus of their individual Qur'an projects. For Aḥmad Khān, the issue was important because European Christians, such as Muir, were questioning the Qur'an by focusing on this issue. Therefore, he explained to them by interpreting the traditions on the collection of the Qur'an as a streamlined process and not an haphazard collection process of the materials. For Thānawī, the issue did not matter because he was more focused on addressing ordinary Muslims. Occasionally, he replied to some questions in brief and tried to strengthen the opinion that there had been no unsystematic collection and arrangement of the Qur'an. In Farāhī, we have a more developed theory of the collection and arrangement of the Qur'an. He took some Qur'anic verses as the basis of his view and also hinted at the problematic understanding of earlier traditions. Farāhī made the following verses the basis of his view:

Q 75:16-19: 16 [Prophet], do not rush your tongue in an attempt to hasten [your memorization of] the Revelation: 17 We shall make sure of its safe collection and recitation. 18 When We have recited it, repeat the recitation 19and We shall make it clear.

He interpreted the verses to mean that it was the responsibility of Allāh that the Qur'an would be collected together in one collection based on various parts that had been revealed at different times. According to these verses, Farāhī thought, that was what happened in the case of the

Qur'an, that is, under the divine supervision, it was finally collected at one place and given its current shape near the death of the Prophet. He also reminded the readers about a prophetic tradition that the archangel Gabriel twice recited the Qur'an with the Prophet near his demise. The later collection during the early caliphate was understood to have been mostly meant to settle the issue of variant readings of the text.²⁷

If we survey other Qur'an commentaries and writings on *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* in British India, this tendency to reinterpret the early traditions on the collection of the Qur'an is seen to have been widespread. The views that emerge from this additional set of writings are similar to what Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī were saying. However, if this question of the collection and preservation of the Qur'an as a whole was settled in the minds of modern Muslim scholars, they remained at odds on the nature of Qur'anic chapters. The important question here was whether or not a chapter had been intelligently linked to other chapters, preceding and following. Earlier in the eighteenth century, Walī Allāh's view in *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr* was that chapters should be treated as separate independent units, like individual *khuṭbāt*, and that there was no need to view one as necessarily linked to other chapters. This view continued to gain favour from certain scholars in post-1857 British India, like for instance, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholar, Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān.²⁸ However, scholars such as Chakrālwi²⁹ and Mashriqī³⁰ tended to subscribe to the view of Farāhī and argued for the Qur'an to be viewed as having clear inter-related themes as manifested in its chapters and not just a collection of unrelated suras. Some of the treatises published in colonial India made this issue of the collection of the Qur'an their

²⁷ For a work focused specifically on Farāhī's ideas on the collection of the Qur'an, see Shehzad Saleem, "Collection of the Qur'an: A Critical and Historical Study of Al-Farāhī's View" (PhD diss., University of Wales Lampeter, 2010).

²⁸ Ḥasan Khān, "Al-Iksīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr," 528, 550-551.

²⁹ Chakrālwi, *Tarjamat al-Qur'ān*, 3-4.

³⁰ Mashriqī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 1, 64, 75-76.

special topic and tried to clarify this issue in the manner that converged with that described above.³¹ As we will see below in the discussion on *nazm*, this view on the collection and arrangement of the Qur'an had a direct bearing on different conceptions of *nazm* and *rabṭ* in the scripture. But this issue was not merely significant in terms of Qur'anic hermeneutics. Lying underneath was the nagging question of the historicity of Muslim traditional records about Islam's formative history. And in this regard, the trend of revisiting the intellectual history of the Islamic formative period started gaining further ground in the post-Mutiny era. A good example from this period was Mirzā Abu al-Faḍl's English translation of the Qur'an. Abū al-Faḍl deviated from the general Muslim tendency in colonial India to reinterpret the early tradition on the history of the Qur'an. Instead, quite radical for his time, he encouraged following the arrangement of suras on the patterns as suggested by al-Suyūṭī and Nöldeke. For Abū al-Faḍl, this would lead to a better understanding of the Qur'an as a record of piecemeal revelation on the Prophet Muḥammad. In other words, reading the suras as they were revealed would make a better sense for the reader instead of an imagined intelligent arrangement.

In conclusion, this emerging conception of the Qur'an's collection and arrangement marked a significant shift in views of the Qur'an in post-Mutiny British India. As discussed below, it led to the emergence of *nazm* and *rabṭ bayn al-āyāt* along new lines as new features of the Qur'an that informed the methods and principles to study the text. In addition, this new view had repercussions for other topics in the Qur'anic sciences such as *naskh*. The larger question

³¹ Manāẓir Aḥsan Gilānī, *Tadwīn-i Qur'ān* (Lahore: Idāra-yi Islāmiyyāt, 1999); Tamannā °Amādī, *Jam° al-Qur'ān* (Karachi: Al-Raḥmān Publishing Trust, 1994); Aḥmad Rāḍā Khān, *Jam° al-Qur'ān wa bi-ma °Azwuhu li-°Uthmān* (Lahore: Alahazrat Network, n.d.), accessed January 21, 2018, http://www.alahazratnetwork.org/data/01-alahazrat_books/01B-alahazrat_books_pdf/168-jam_al_quraan.pdf.

were how the Qur'an came into being under the divine instruction, and what was left intact to be followed for all times to come and what was abrogated.

Arabic Linguistics and Literature

The Re-emergence of Nazm

As noted earlier, the idea of *rabṭ* as a form of *naẓm* was already prevalent in the pre-modern *tafsīr* in South Asia. As some of the pre-modern exegetes in South Asia explained in their introductions, they had, in general, a linear view of the inter-connectedness of verses in a sura. Moreover, they had not made a separate interpretive principle out of *naẓm* in the way the exegetes in the post-1857 period did. However, in this line of pre-modern interpreters of the Qur'an, al-Mahā'imī in the fifteenth century, by all means was an innovator in hermeneutical thinking and unconsciously paved the way for a post-Mutiny thematic reading of a Qur'anic sura. One can also take Walī Allāh as a case in point to compare pre-modern and modern trends in *naẓm*. In Walī Allāh, there was apparently no sign of thinking of interpreting the Qur'an based on a divinely informed intelligent structure of the Qur'an. For Walī Allāh, whenever he used the phrase “*naẓm* of the Qur'an,” it meant that *naẓm* was more related to the meaningfulness of Qur'anic vocabulary and less with its structure and arrangement, a line of thinking already found in early and medieval Arabic writings on Qur'anic rhetoric. Even among Walī Allāh's later intellectual lineage, such as in Pānīpatī, a clear pattern of the inter-connectedness of verses and of suras was not an overwhelming concern, although it is arguable that at times he made an effort to identify connections between verses. In the light of this dissertation's three case studies and the larger literature on the Qur'an in colonial India, this immense growth of fascination with the *naẓm* feature of the Qur'an is strikingly seen in the post-Mutiny period with the acceleration of European critiques of the Qur'an.

While Aḥmad Khān was mindful of this facet of the Qur'an, he did not make it his central principle of interpretation. He recognized the importance of this aspect but without feeling an urgent need to make a methodological principle out of it. In Thānawī, we move a step forward. He made *naẓm* one of his principles of interpretation that aimed to unfold the *rabṭ* feature in the text. However, that was meant more for facilitating the common man's reading of the text, instead of as a principle that could have a radical impact on the understanding of the Qur'an. Farāhī was a culmination in this latter regard. Interpreting the Qur'an based on divulging its *naẓm* (which was hidden in its *‘amūd*) was the core principle of his exegetical enterprise. For him, all other principles were subservient to this meta-principle. For Thānawī, features such as the “coherence of the Qur'an” or the “unity of a sura” were more of an aesthetic dimension of the Qur'an; otherwise, his aim was to elaborate some already received interpretations of the Qur'an in colonial India. For Farāhī, the issue was beyond aesthetics; to him, *naẓm* was the core property of the Qur'an that governed and shaped its meaning. Therefore, the supreme principle of interpreting the Qur'an should be to follow a methodical procedure that could unfold this characteristic of the scripture.

Resembling the positions of the three commentators, many other exegetes in the post-1857 period felt the need to read the Qur'an as a modern book having inter-connected verses, sections, and suras. However specific conceptions of coherence vacillated between linear *naẓm* (or *rabṭ*) and total *naẓm*. On the issue of linear versus total *naẓm*, the Qur'anic writings emerging from Deoband's platform depicted the former trend. For instance, ‘Uthmānī, in his *Tafsīr-i ‘Uthmānī*, was more concerned to provide ordinary readers with a smooth text with brief glosses that could enable them to read through apparently challenging portions of the Qur'an, including the so-called breaks in the text with which Europeans were so much concerned. In the same vein,

both Lāhorī of Deoband and Muḥammad °Alī of Aḥmadiyya movement in their commentaries stressed the inter-connectedness of passages of the Qur'an and the coherence of the Qur'an's structural arrangement, a technique also meant for a popular reading of the Qur'an.³² If public facilitation of Qur'anic reading was the standard, Lāhorī excelled on this standard as histories of *tafsīr* in South Asia remember him as a great contributor to this facet of appreciating the Qur'an. In addition to Deoband's positions on *naẓm*, others, such as those from the Ahl-i Ḥadīth group, were also inclined to interpret the Qur'an in the light of this principle. Amritsarī, in addition to positioning himself in his commentary as a defender of Islam against Christian and Hindu criticism on the Qur'an, highlighted *rabṭ* as one of his objectives to unfold in his interpretation of the Qur'an.³³ Impressed with al-Mahā'imī, he stressed the importance of this for an easy reading of the Qur'an. Āzād, in the same vein, urged scholars to write commentaries to highlight this facet of the Qur'an. He criticized pre-modern commentaries in general for presenting the Qur'an a disjointed text.³⁴

In comparison to Deobandī authors, others, like Chakrālwī³⁵ and Mashriqī, could be seen, somewhat in the fashion of Farāhī, as advocates for total *naẓm*, that is, an overall coherence prevailing throughout the Qur'an as a whole and in its parts. Mashriqī stressed this in the following words:

Like the *rabṭ* in nature (*fiṭrat*), Qur'anic *rabṭ* is also of the same kind, that is, it is meaningfully connected. Those who are narrow minded and lack in knowledge cannot see this feature. They hesitate to read it or get bored with it. The ignorant have separated it into parts. Those who have no insight [into the Qur'an] see it as

³² Lāhorī introduced a regular caption in his *tafsīr* to indicate connections between Qur'anic passages. Muḥammad °Alī's stressed the coherence of the current structural arrangement of the Qur'an. See Muḥammad °Alī, *English Translation and Commentary*, xiii.

³³ Amritsarī, *Tafsīr-I Thanā'ī*, vol. 1, 5.

³⁴ Abū al-Kalām Āzād, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, 68-70.

³⁵ Chakrālwī, *Tarjamāt al-Qur'ān*, 4.

repetitive and superfluous. The traditional *‘ālim* quickly goes through it without dwelling upon it. The reciter reads it aimlessly.³⁶

For Mashriqī, the Qur’an could be read as a coherent book in the light of its overall aim of guiding Muslims and mankind, and as such it could resolve matters of discord among Muslims. This recognition of a universal ethos was the larger key to making connections between suras and also reading it as a structured book. He, like Āzād, also dismissed the pre-modern practice of verse-by-verse reading the Qur’an. Highlighting these exegetical voices should not be taken to mean that verse-by-verse reading of the Qur’an was going out of fashion. As will be discussed below in the section on the influence of the pre-modern *tafsīr*, pre-modern approaches to reading the Qur’an forcefully survived in a number of ways.

The Quest for Singular Meaning of the Qur’an

The three case studies embodied another interpretive struggle as well. This was between a polyvalency of Qur’anic meaning versus one singular meaning of Qur’anic verses (and of the vocabulary involved). The pre-modern Qur’anic exegesis was inclined towards accepting a multiplicity of meaning, as the work of Saleh emphasizes.³⁷ In the South Asian tradition of Qur’anic exegesis, Walī Allāh started exploring this field of Qur’anic semantics. He suggested that, in contrast to allegorical verses, what are called clear versus should have one definite meaning. Regarding semantic problems, he wrote:

It should be known that a saying is *muḥkam* when the person knowing the language cannot derive out of it more than one meaning. However, in this interpretation, the way the first [or pre-Islamic] Arabs understood will be followed and not [the manner] of today’s interpreters who split hairs and whose distractions are the

³⁶ Mashriqī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 1, 85.

³⁷ Saleh, *Formation of the Classical Tafsīr Tradition* (see Introduction, n. 5).

severest of the diseases that make the *muḥkam mutashābih* and the known unknown.³⁸

This quest for singular meaning was re-activated in the post-Mutiny Period. Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī all pursued this quest to various degrees. Although Aḥmad Khān's principles did not clearly stress a single meaning for Qur'anic verses, his principles of linguistic inquiry were focused on developing a systematic procedure to determine a fixed meaning. He was very much concerned with determining what was clear and what was allegorical in the Qur'an. Even in the case of allegorical verses, Aḥmad Khān wanted to make every effort to determine their definite signification. In Thānawī, we find another step in this direction of singular meaning. He too elaborated in his principles of interpretation that one of the key tasks in his hermeneutical project was to identify a clear meaning for each Qur'anic verse. As he explained, it was only on a very few occasions that he remained doubtful about what a particular verse meant. Otherwise, he claimed, he was successful in guiding the reader towards one meaning. It was in Farāhī that we find this trend reaching its culmination. Farāhī viewed the Qur'an as a possible instrument that could bring unity to the otherwise disintegrating Muslim community. Based on his focus on *naẓm*, he claimed that the Qur'an has only one fixed meaning if one reflected on it in the light of the controlling theme that gives coherence to the text. This one singular meaning, he thought, would extinguish the fire of polyvalency of Qur'anic meaning that had charred Muslim unity.

This trend towards identifying one singular meaning is further corroborated in other exegetes and writers on the Qur'an. The underlying assumption for this interpretive position was

³⁸ Walī Allāh, *Al-Fawz al-Kabīr*, 98.

also theological in nature, for how could God confuse humans by giving His word a multiplicity of meanings? Mashriqī and Āzād stressed the need for discovering a definitive meaning of the Qur'an in the time of a social crisis of discord that they imagined their times to be. Mashriqī's following words are indicative of this rising trend:

... [the Qur'an] is totally organized, matchless, definitive and final... For any code [like the Qur'an], it should have one meaning or have one underlying core meaning. Every clause should carry one and only one meaning. It leaves no room for [further] interpretation or [possible] subterfuge. It gives one meaning from whatever perspective we look upon it... The possibility for [further] interpretation makes it impossible to pursue a unified action [or struggle].³⁹

This trend was also manifested in Chakrālwī. For him, this definitive meaning can be discovered if one makes the Qur'an, and only the Qur'an, the basis of his investigation.⁴⁰ This issue of one definitive meaning was also linked with the Qur'anic verses that said it was in clear Arabic (Q 28; Q 18)⁴¹ and that it had been made easy for the purpose of seeking guidance. This was highlighted by many thinkers, such as the activist and scholar, Sindhī, who said:

The problem is that different people in different times, influenced by different circumstances, have written a variety of things in their commentaries and explanations - things that have no harmony with the Qur'an. This has led to people following a variety of paths based on the Qur'an.⁴²

In addition to the hints given by the Qur'an in terms of its clear meaning, exegetes, in their quest for one definitive meaning, also sourced their inspiration for this search to an imagined pristine

³⁹ Mashriqī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 1, 86-87.

⁴⁰ Chakrālwī, *Tarjamat al-Qur'ān*, 3-4, 10.

⁴¹ Q 28:2: "These are the verses of the Scripture that makes things clear"; Q 18:1-3: "1 Praise be to God, who sent down the Scripture to His servant and made it unerringly straight, 2 warning of severe punishment from Him, and [giving] glad news to the believers who do good deeds - an excellent reward 3 that they will always enjoy."

⁴² Sindhī, *Qur'ān-i Karīm kā Muṭāli'a*, 9.

time in the earliest of generations of Muslims, that is, the Companions of the Prophet, who were supposed to have experienced the Qur'an in its "purest form" during the life of the Prophet and also after his demise. For scholars such as Āzād the proliferation of commentaries in the subsequent generations was due to the fact that exegetes were influenced by later social and political conditions and thus, forgot the very "natural" or "pure" way of reading the Qur'an as pursued by the Companions. What is "natural" was explained by Āzād in the following somewhat elusive manner, cultivating a historical imagining of the early moments of Islamic history:

When the Qur'an was revealed, its first audience was that same [natural] group. Their minds were not moulded by the artificial and constructed moulds of civilization. This mind was content in the simple, natural condition. The consequence was that the Qur'an resided in their hearts the way it actually was, and their minds had no difficulty in understanding that. Whenever the Companions would hear a verse or sura, they [immediately] found its true signification by simply hearing that.⁴³

But not all were impressed by this singular meaning. The Lucknow-based scholar, Malihābādī, author of *Tafsīr Mawāhib al-Rahmān*, was more interested in harmonizing apparently contradictory meanings of a verse as transferred by the pre-modern exegetical tradition, instead of developing a theory to arrive at a fixed meaning of the Qur'an. For scholars like Malihābādī, any quest for fixed meaning would ultimately open the way for very subjective interpretations of the Qur'an (*tafsīr bi-l-rā'y*), which, he contended, was something abhorred by generations of Muslims. The same ambivalence was seen in Ḥaqqānī, author of *Faṭḥ al-Mannān*, who was more interested in conducting inter-faith polemics than in developing a theory for determining singular meaning.

⁴³ Āzād, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, 66.

Despite this observable tendency in modern commentaries to stress singular meaning of the Qur'an, the matter becomes complicated when we study the commentaries in detail, as my overall engagement with the literature suggests. Categorically stressing singular meaning as a new feature of the modern genre, as argued by Pink,⁴⁴ seems untenable on two grounds. First, it is difficult to establish that pre-modern commentaries were devoid of this feature of privileging one meaning over many meanings of Qur'anic vocabulary and verses.⁴⁵ Second, there is a certain ambivalence in modern Qur'an commentaries on the issue of semantic polyvalency. At times, commentators appear emphasizing singular meaning; on other occasions, they leave the reader with a somewhat openness towards multiple meanings of Qur'anic verses.

New Trends in the Literal-Figurative Debate

The three case studies treated in the previous chapters have also brought to light new emerging positions on the old debate in Qur'anic studies over how far Qur'anic verses may be read literally or figuratively. Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī were situated on a continuum in this regard. Quite contrary to the observation of Pink, in her study of modern commentaries, to the effect that the modern genre was more inclined towards literal interpretation, there was no sign in the three scholars examined here of any wholesale program of assigning more weight to the literal interpretation of the Qur'an. Of the three, Aḥmad Khān was inclined more towards reading in a figurative sense those verses which appeared to him as merely based on continuing mythologies. Thus, we found his treatment of the word *malak* to be an exercise in finding its

⁴⁴ Pink, *Sunnitischer Tafsir*, 301-302 (see Introduction, n. 9).

⁴⁵ Pink makes Norman Calder's work as one of her key references to make this point. But I think it needs a larger study to establish the feature of semantic polyvalency in pre-modern Qur'an commentaries. For Calder's oft-quoted article, see Norman Calder, "Tafsir from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, eds. G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (1993; repr. London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 101-140.

figurative meaning, although his interpretation was seen as unacceptably figurative in the eyes of his opponents. Moreover, the principles which Aḥmad Khān discussed in his *Taḥrīr* had a special section devoted to this discussion. He contended that one of the primary tasks of a commentator was to identify, based on the context of verses, what is said literally and what is figuratively in the Qur'an. In *Thānawī*, there was no sign of developing any systematic procedure to separate the literal from the figurative. His characteristic method would be to begin from some well-known positions on a particular verse and then elaborate them for his audience, in anticipation of its questions. He never felt a need to diverge from well-known opinions. He was more inclined towards elaborating “difficult” verses in his own way instead of resorting to a metaphorical interpretation. Farāhī was more systematic in this regard. He saw this issue of the literal and the figurative as depending on the context of the verses and the context of the sura under study. Thus, a thorough investigation, in the light of the text and the trends in pre-Islamic Arabic literature, would in his view make it evident what was to be taken literally or otherwise, and if this exercise required any retracing of the development of the Muslim sciences, such as lexicography, an exegete should follow this task as well. This point is further elaborated in the next section below.

A look at some other works in British India reproduces the same continuum of positions manifested in the three scholars, along with providing some added insights. These works reveal that in addition to resolving this conflict between the literal and the figurative, authors were influenced by intra-Sunni polemics on the interpretation of the Qur'an. It appears that the polemics between commentators rather than a serious search to settle issues of Qur'anic semantics dominated this debate. Whenever a commentator chose a figurative meaning, he would present it as something original and in contrast to the literal meaning allegedly chosen by

his opponent(s). In addition, the somewhat rising trend of assigning more weight to figurative meaning was the result of the criticism, such as that expressed by Āzād, levelled against the traditionalist schools which were seen as the product of following age-old interpretive practices (*taqlid*) without ever recognizing the need to read the text itself, instead of relying on earlier commentaries.⁴⁶

The treatment of Aḥmad Khān's biographer, the famous poet-scholar Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, further hinted at this controversial issue that he saw in his milieu. He wrote:

Now it only needs to be seen if we are or are not in need of rethinking and settling against the grain of the consensual meaning of such Qur'anic words and instances about which Shāh Walī Allāh says that it is yet to be decided by consensus whether the words have been spoken in figurative meaning or literal.⁴⁷

Ḥālī further explained that on many occasions following a figurative meaning against the semantic currents of classical *tafsīr* would relieve the interpreter of many objections that had been leveled against the Qur'an in his days. This approach also manifested its connection with debates on the issue of reason versus revelation in colonial India. New approaches to the text of the Qur'an, such as those of Aḥmad Khān, assumed that having recourse to a metaphorical meaning might appeal more to the reasoning faculties of an emerging modernity among Muslim educated minds in colonial India.

Despite this new attention to the possibility of reading figuratively the verses which had largely been interpreted in a literal sense, there were scholars, such as Malīḥābādī,⁴⁸ who professed no interest in settling this debate through any new hermeneutic procedure. Their main

⁴⁶ Āzād, *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān*, 66-69.

⁴⁷ Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, "Qur'ān-i Majīd mēn ab Na'ī Tafsīr kī Gunjā'ish Bāqī hay yā nahīn?" in *Maqālāt-i Ḥālī*, vol. 1 (New Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqī-yi Urdū, 1934), 243.

⁴⁸ See *muqaddima* in Malīḥābādī, *Mawāhib al-Raḥmān*, 1-56.

frame of reference remained pre-modern exegetical resources with all the divergences and convergences these displayed.

The Study of the Arabic Lexicon and Arabic Rhetoric

The use of the Arabic lexicon and reliance on theories of Arabic rhetoric have always been an indispensable part of the interpretation of the Qur'an. The former provides the basic resource for philological investigation and the latter is important for understanding the peculiar diction and style of the Qur'an. Theories of Arabic rhetoric also provided Muslim interpreters the basis to support the idea of the Qur'an's inimitability in terms of its eloquence. Muslim thought in colonial India showed signs of emerging thinking in both these areas. The use of the Arabic lexicon was predominantly conventional in the case of Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī. Both relied on standard Arabic dictionaries, pre-modern Qur'an commentaries, and *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* works. As noted by Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī in their commentaries, pre-modern Arabic dictionaries such as *Siḥāḥ* of al-Jawharī (d. 1009), *Qāmūs* of al-Firūzābādī (d. 1414), and the Qur'anic dictionary, *al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾān* of al-Isfahānī (d. 1190), were available to Qur'an commentators in colonial India. Moreover, most of the time in their commentaries, both of the exegetes used pre-modern Arabic commentaries as their starting points to explore the meaning of Qur'anic vocabulary. Thānawī routinely mentioned his reliance on the commentaries of al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍawī on philological and semantic issues. In contrast not only to Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī but also to probably all other commentators and thinkers on the Qur'an in colonial India, Farāhī emerged as quite radical for his times. For him, in order to grasp the true meaning, diction, and spirit of the Qur'anic message, the historical formation of both the Arabic lexicon and Arabic rhetoric needed revisiting whenever required in the light of the divine text. Other than Farāhī's works, there were occasionally other studies dealing with these areas of

Arabic linguistics. Histories of *tafsīr* literature in India, such as those by Zubaid Ahmad and Sālim Qidwāʾī (as discussed in Chapter One) mentioned a few surviving works on Arabic philology but these were mostly pre-modern Arabic works. We also find some works written in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ḥasan Khān had written *al-Bulgha ilā Uṣūl al-Lughā* which is seen as following the lines of al-Suyūṭī's *al-Mazhar*.⁴⁹ Another pertinent work is Amritsarī's *Bayān al-Furqān ʿalā ʿIlm al-Bayān* that was meant to explain Qur'anic verses in the light of pre-modern theories of Arabic rhetoric and classical Arabic literature.⁵⁰ Other works such as Deoband's Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī's *Mushkilāt al-Qurʾān*, which focused on elaborating some selected vocabulary and verses for the readers of the Qur'an, was based on pre-modern commentaries.⁵¹ In short, except for Farāhī, thinking about Arabic rhetoric and the Arabic lexicon on new lines appeared something beyond question. In this milieu, Farāhī, with his background of training under Sahāranpūrī, stressed tracing the historical development of these areas of Arabic linguistics in order to situate the Qur'an again in its pre-Islamic environment which was considered to be its original world.

In the case of Arabic rhetoric, as we have seen Farāhī in his work, *Jamharat al-Balāgha*, stressed that the development of this area of inquiry had been founded mainly on the work of Aristotle, whose ideas were essentially based on the Greek language and literature. By contrast, Farāhī's own study of the Qur'an and pre-Islamic Arabic literature found previously established principles of classical Arabic rhetoric as either flawed or insufficient. Nuʿmānī's detailed review of Farāhī's work on Arabic rhetoric in the journal *al-Nadwa* published under the aegis of

⁴⁹ Sahād Ḥamadān Aḥmad al-Samarāʾī, "Manhaj fī Al-Bulgha ilā Uṣūl al-Lughā li-Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khan" (master's thesis, University of Tikrit, Iraq, 2004).

⁵⁰ See Qidwāʾī, *Hindūstānī Mufasssīrīn*, 349-350.

⁵¹ Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī, *Mushkilāt al-Qurʾān* (Multan: Idāra-yi Tāʾlifāt-i Ashrafiyya, n.d.).

Nadwat al-°Ulamā° stressed the need for more works on this topic as it was the need of the hour to better understand the Qur'an.⁵²

On the issue of the development of the Arabic lexicon, Farāhī pointed out that despite the invaluable work done by early and medieval lexicographers to record the meanings of Arabic words, it was essentially the work of humans and could be flawed on some occasions. What Farāhī stressed was that, in cases where some established lexical meaning did not make sense in the context of Qur'anic verses, including Qur'anic poetics, the meaning of the word in question could be re-investigated in pre-Islamic Arabic literature to see its use there, instead of adhering to a prevalent lexical meaning. For an illustration, see Chapter Five where we discussed Farāhī's treatment of Qur'anic vocabulary in Q 87:5. It was these kinds of seemingly secular investigations of the Qur'an that perhaps made Farāhī's and his followers' methods of understanding the Qur'an attractive in the secular academy. His school is often labelled as the Farāhī school and popularly classified as "modernist," although it does not fit well with the nature of work he was producing.

Vernacularization and Qur'anic Hermeneutics

The trend of vernacularizing the Qur'an into Urdu that had started in the decades preceding the Mutiny took further root in the later period. This new scenario that had brought the Qur'an into the public sphere led many, in particular among traditionalist schools, to undertake new "authentic" translations in order to combat what they saw as perverted translations that rendered the Qur'an in an "incorrect" manner. Thānawī highlighted this aim in his introduction to his Qur'an commentary and also wrote two detailed essays in which he criticized the methods

⁵² Shiblī Nu°mānī, "Naẓm al-Qur°ān wa Jamharat al-Balāgha," in *Maqālāt-i Shiblī*, ed. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: Dār al-Muṣannifīn, 2008), 12-25.

of translation adopted by Nadhīr Aḥmad and Ḥayrat Dihlawī, who both were supporters of Aḥmad Khān. Similarly, Thānawī dismissed the emergence of poetical translations of the Qur'an on the grounds that such renderings were susceptible to altering the meaning of the Arabic Qur'an. But this issue of translating the Qur'an was not limited to modernist or journalistic intellectuals and to the traditionalists who formulated rebuttals of them. The matter was even contested among traditionalist schools as well. Thus, we have precedents of the intense tradition of polemics on this issue as well.

However, other than these social repercussions of vernacularization of the Qur'an, here we are especially interested in the question of what the trend meant in terms of its impact on Qur'anic hermeneutics. The underlying issue at hand was that a translation was not seen as a simple rendering of the Arabic Qur'an into Urdu or any other vernacular language. Translation was instead seen as another form of interpretation or as some kind of commentary. This commentary was incorporated into the text either by adding parentheses, implying the “intended” meaning of the Qur'an, or by selecting particular words and phrases in the vernacular to represent the “accurate” Qur'anic meaning. A much larger repercussion of this process of vernacular rendering was that a lay reader, without the aid of an instructor, could construct a religious worldview out of the Qur'an. This new approach to the text would ultimately lead to more interpretive consequences in the public sphere of the post-colonial period which saw new kinds of engagement with religious texts.⁵³

⁵³ For a recent work that has occasioned quite a controversy in the media on the issues of authority in interpreting the Qur'an is Ziauddin Sardar, *Reading the Qur'an: The Contemporary Relevance of the Sacred Text of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The Pre-Modern Exegetical Tradition and Exegetical Resources

Changing Attitude towards the Use of Isrā'īliyyāt

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, pre-modern Arabic commentators on the Qur'an used many resources to determine the meaning and context of verses of the Qur'an. The post-1857 period saw transformations in Indian exegetes' attitude towards these resources. One such resource was *isrā'īliyyāt*, the legends of the Jews. In Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī, we find many shades of opinion on this issue. Aḥmad Khān was a good representative example of entirely dismissing this corpus. He vehemently emphasized that the whole tradition of the interpretation of the Qur'an had been influenced by these foreign, unreliable traditions. He stressed that it was only by making the text of the Qur'an itself authoritative, and not by using these extra-Qur'anic exegetical resources, that an exegete could free himself from interpreting the scripture wrongly. This trend of proclaiming to avoid *isrā'īliyyāt* was not limited only to modernists like Aḥmad Khān, however. Thānawī, to the surprise of many secular observers of modern Islam, also manifested little interest in this extra-Qur'anic material to interpret the Qur'an. We hardly see any use of such materials in his *tafsīr*. The difference between Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī was one of how they saw this problem. Criticism by scholars like Aḥmad Khān concerning early Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an for incorporating *isrā'īliyyāt* meant questioning the integrity of the whole exegetical tradition, as we noted in the case of Nu'mānī in the Introduction to this current study. This is what Thānawī avoided by not openly dismissing the corpus of these narratives. What he did, instead, was not to use such materials in his interpretation of the Qur'an. This was one of the characteristic ways that traditionalists constructed their relationship with past resources of the Muslim tradition. In the case of Farāhī, it was always a case of developing a systematic procedure to interpret the Qur'an. Although he

dismissed *isrāʿīliyyāt*, he agreed with using other historical sources related to the history of the Jews. He wrote:

...instead of the legends of the Jews which are commonly found among Muslims, we should prefer the [written] history of the People of the Book because Muslim exegetes usually recorded these legends from those Jews who were not aware of their history and their prophets, Therefore, it is preferable to make their relatively reliable history books the basis [of knowing more of the background of Qurʿanic verses] and for the support of exegetical positions, instead of making their unfounded traditions the basis of interpretation.

In addition to the three case studies, this trend of dismissing *isrāʿīliyyāt* was widespread, especially in the early part of the twentieth century in British India. The writings of the scholars labelled Salafī or Ahl-i Ḥadīth claimed to distance themselves from what they took to be the concocted traditions of the People of the Book. The title of the commentary by Ḥasan Khān manifested this clearly when it declared that it was a commentary based on the Salafī method and tradition, and that it was free of Jewish legends, as well as of religious and theological debates. Moreover, it claimed to be based on previous commentaries, but not to contain unreliable things that reported in them.⁵⁴ In the Ahl-i Qurʿān movements, the stress on liberating Qurʿanic interpretation from the burden of this corpus was equally vehement. Traditionalist scholars were also equally hesitant in acknowledging the use of this material in their commentaries. One also finds this in Chakṛālwī⁵⁵ and others.⁵⁶ Chakṛālwī seemed to be the culmination of this process of distancing oneself from using any kind of source outside the Qurʿan for its interpretation. These Ahl al-Qurʿan movements, as Qasmi notes, grew from the

⁵⁴ The Arabic title read: *Fath al-Bayān fī Maqāṣid al-Qurʿān: Tafṣīr Salafī Atharī Khālin min al-Isrāʿīliyyāt wa-l-Jadaliyyāt al-Madhhabiyya wa al-Kalāmiyya yaʿnī Jamīʿ al-Tafāsīr wa lā Tughannī Jamīʿ uha ʿanhu*.

⁵⁵ Chakṛālwī, *Tarjamat al-Qurʿān*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Other than the Ahl al-Qurʿān movements, notable scholars in colonial India such as Aslam Jayrājpūrī (1881-1955) also distanced themselves from the methodology of using extra-Qurʿanic materials for the interpretation of the Qurʿan.

earlier trends of sceptically looking at exegetical resources based on Jewish and Christian traditions. For this reason, Chakrālwī and other scholars like Aslam Jayrājpūrī⁵⁷ ultimately argued against developing any sophisticated principle to use these traditions in some way in order to elaborate sometimes “difficult” passages of the Qur’an.

Moreover, the biggest force behind stressing this hermeneutical issue was often one commentator’s motive to present his work on the Qur’an as more authoritative than his opponent’s. One of the dominant and characteristic ways of dismissing another’s opinion, in a milieu of religious polemics, was to claim that the antagonist’s position was based on the unreliable corpus of Jewish and Christian legends, or on other similarly unreliable sources. This seemed to happen, on many occasions, without studying the other’s approach in detail. If Chakrālwī criticized traditionalist commentaries for incorporating this material, his criticism was unfounded, as many such traditionalist commentaries did not use these extra-Qur’anic sources so frequently in their works. Similarly, Aḥmad Khān’s critique of traditionalist authors, like Thānawī or Murādābādī of the Barēlwī school, was equally baseless as many of them either did not employ these narratives in their *tafāsīr* or drew upon them on a few occasions. Ultimately, all these debates were boiling down to the issue of trying to construct one’s authority and authenticity in matters of Qur’anic hermeneutics.

The Status of ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān:

Naskh and Asbāb al-Nuzūl

Another trend that gained a footing in this period was the reluctance to accept the classical positions on the questions of *asbāb al-nuzūl* and *naskh*, topics that had formed a permanent part of pre-modern books on *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*. In the post-Mutiny period, the three

⁵⁷ Qasmi cited Aslam Jayrājpūrī’s relevant work *Hamārē Dīnī ‘Ulūm*. Qasmi, *Ahl al-Qur’an Movements*, 186-190.

cases studied reflected a range of opinions that to a great extent was representative of the period. Criticism of the pre-modern application of *naskh* in interpreting Qur'anic verses was widespread in British India. However, as in the case of *isrā'iliyyāt*, developing a position on *naskh* was again a tactical manoeuvre to situate oneself in contrast to other exegetes. Aḥmad Khān is often studied as a strong opponent of *naskh*, but this impression about him is based on his broad conclusion on the issue rather than on what he actually explained. As we note below, in practice he followed a conventional approach to the issue. He wrote:

Christian scholars erred in understanding the words *nāsikh* and *mansūkh*, which were applied by Muslim scholars as particular terms on Qur'anic verses. They [Christian scholars] understood mistakenly that abrogating verses made abrogated verses inactive because there was some kind of defect or ambiguity lying in the [latter] verses.⁵⁸

He explained that *nāsikh* and *mansūkh* were applied in two terminological senses in Muslim scholarly history. First, the terms were used in the sense of abrogating a previous instance of divine *sharī'ah* such as Jewish law being superseded by a new code like Islamic law. He highlighted that such kinds of abrogation were not possible in the case of the Qur'an because there was to be no new *sharī'ah* after it. From this standard, the oft-quoted verse (Q 2:106)⁵⁹, in his opinion, was simply mentioning the possibility of abrogation of some biblical verses by Allāh. In the second sense, Muslim scholars applied these two terms to Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet. Aḥmad Khān said:

In the Qur'an and Ḥadīth, there are laws that pertain to individual situations (*amr-i wāḥid*) but those laws were revealed in different conditions and times. When that

⁵⁸ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Qur'ān Janāb-i Payghambar-i Khudā par kis Ṭarḥa Nāzil hūā," 489.

⁵⁹ The verse reads: Q 2: 105-106: "105 Neither those People of the Book who disbelieve nor the idolaters would like anything good to be sent down to you from your Lord, but God chooses for His grace whoever He will: His bounty has no limits. 106 Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar. Do you [Prophet] not know that God has power over everything?"

situation no longer exists, such laws become not worthy of being followed (*ghayr wājib al-taʿmīl*) and are replaced by a new law that is suitable for the changed situation. In such a circumstance, Muslim scholars apply *mansūkh* on the first law and *nāsikh* on the second law, but that does not mean that there was a defect in the first law... In reality, [even this fact shows] there was no *mansūkh* happening, because if at any given point, such conditions [in which the first law was revealed] emerge again, that same first law will again be valid, and the second law will become inactive.⁶⁰

Aḥmad Khān explained that it was only in later centuries of Muslim history when this *nāsikh-mansūkh* paradigm was applied too lavishly in compiling books of jurisprudence that problematic situations emerged in terms of understanding the Qurʾan on such issues.

In the case of Thānawī, there was not much difference in his position as compared to Aḥmad Khān. In Thānawī's standard praxis of interpretation, without placing any doubt on the resources of *ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, he simply explained why some verses were abrogated by others due to the change of circumstances. In contrast to Aḥmad Khān and Farāhī, Thānawī read the verse Q 2:106⁶¹ as discussing the abrogation of Qurʾanic verses and not biblical verses. But his explanation for the justification of such an abrogation was otherwise quite similar to Aḥmad Khān, that is, abrogating verses in the Qurʾan were the product of Allāh's wisdom in changing situations. Farāhī, though quite in line with Aḥmad Khān and Thānawī on this issue, was more interested in the method to determine where abrogation occurred and where not.⁶² Thus, he was similar to the others in theory, but he differed in applying his methods. For instance, Farāhī disagreed on treating certain verses as *mansūkh* and interpreted them differently, rather

⁶⁰ Aḥmad Khān, "Qurʾān Janāb-i Payghambar-i Khudā par kis Ṭarḥa Nāzil hūā," 492.

⁶¹ Q 2:106: "Any revelation We cause to be superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar. Do you [Prophet] not know that God has power over everything?"

⁶² See Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, "Al-Rasūkh fi Maʿrifat al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh," in *Rasāʾil fī ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān*, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: al-Dāʾira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2011), 141-175.

understanding such verses based on *naskh* principle, a line of thought found as well in Walī Allāh, who reduced the number of *naskh* instances to five.⁶³

Other scholars tended to have similar opinions in this regard. They applied the two terms to the abrogation either of previous scriptures or of certain Qur’anic verses. However, even radicals on this issue, like Chakṛālwī, who accepted only the Qur’an in matters of understanding Islam, were forced to develop a new methodology. Chakṛālwī bluntly dismissed the possibility of *naskh* in the Qur’an even in the cases of changed circumstances that necessitated a new ruling. For him, any so-called “second law” abrogating a “first law” on the same matter simply involved a misunderstanding on the part of exegetes in Muslim intellectual history. In his opinion, a second law did not abrogate the first law, but was only meant for a specific situation, and thus the first law remained valid. How far Chakṛālwī was loyal to the text in interpreting the law is a question that cannot be dealt with here, but one thing his argument showed clearly was that he too was in need of a new method of interpretation on this complex issue. The challenge was posed to some extent by the Qur’an itself, when its related verses are studied, since it apparently conveyed the sense that some abrogation was possible or had happened indeed. In short, Muslim scholars in the post-1857 world tended to be similar in their positions on *naskh*. Their writings demonstrated a commitment to defend the Qur’an in the wake of non-Muslim criticism on it. Their mutual disagreements seemed to be more a product of their polemics rather than the result of their new methods.

In the case of *asbāb* materials, Aḥmad Khān treated the stories included in this corpus on the same lines as he did for *isrā’iliyyāt*. Thānawī, in his characteristic style, mentioned one or

⁶³ Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, “Al-Rasūkh fī Ma’rifat al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh,” in *Rasā’il fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*, vol. 2 (Azamgarh: al-Dā’ira al-Ḥamīdiyya, 2011), 141-175.

two narratives in the Arabic portion of his text as a symbol of his connection with the past exegetical and *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* tradition. However, most of the time, after mentioning a *sabab*, his explanation of a verse was presented quite independently of the supposedly historical narrative. All he wanted was to help a common reader understand the verse. His use of *asbāb* material was more ceremonial than something on which he based his interpretation. Farāhī was more interested in developing a method to address this issue, and thus, he built his position on earlier tradition including on Walī Allāh’s position. The latter did not understand *asbāb al-nuzūl* in literal sense, that is, in the sense that certain Qur’anic verses were necessitated by certain historical situations and that such situations could be seen in *asbāb al-nuzūl* traditions. Farāhī saw no need to incorporate these materials into the process of interpreting the Qur’an, except where the stories mentioned in these sources conformed to the text of the Qur’an. His approach, as he claimed, was more linguistic and put priority on being “loyal” to the text of the Qur’an. He argued that *sabab* is not external to the text. It is the sacred text that hints at the possible context of a revelation or the application of a particular verse to a particular situation.

Among other scholars in the post-Mutiny India, we consistently find a trend of dismissing the authority of these so-called historical *asbāb* narratives in the interpretation of the Qur’an. Ahl-i Ḥadīth scholars like Ḥasan Khān tended to avoid supporting their use, if not bluntly.⁶⁴ For his part, Chakṛālwī was a vocal opponent to the use of these materials.⁶⁵ However, for traditionalist scholars such as Na‘īm al-Dīn Murādābādī of the Ahl-i Sunnat wa al-Jamā‘at⁶⁶ and Malīḥābādī, these narratives, if transmitted through “reliable” sources, remained important in the interpretation of the Qur’an and played a key role in conceiving *rabṭ* between Qur’anic verses

⁶⁴ Ḥasan Khān, “Al-Iksīr fī Uṣūl al-Tafsīr,” 581-583.

⁶⁵ Chakṛālwī, *Tarjamat al-Qur’ān*, 3-4.

⁶⁶ Raḍā Khān and Murādābādī, *Khazā‘in al-‘Irfān*, (Lahore: Majlis Al-Madīna al-‘Ilmiyya, 2011), 2-6.

and sections. Malīḥābādī, in particular, was inclined towards conceiving a harmony between apparently contradictory stories that were connected with a particular verse or verses as the reasons for their revelation.

The issue of the use of *asbāb al-nuzūl* was also related to the persistent use of classical Qur'an commentaries in the post-1857 period. Close study of Muslim approaches to the Qur'an in the modern period strengthens the view that modern commentaries were being written on the canvas provided by classical commentaries, which also employed exegetical resources like *asbāb al-nuzūl*.

The Influence of the Pre-modern Arabic Tafṣīr

As mentioned in the Introduction to this current study, academic historians specialized in modern Qur'an commentaries have recognized the sustained influence of pre-modern Arabic commentaries on *tafṣīr* written in the modern period. But this recognition has only played a nominal role in their efforts to characterize the nature of the modern commentary written by different kinds of Muslim exegetes. In many of these intellectual histories, the primary focus routinely shifts to uncover those features of the modern genre that have somehow eclipsed the influence of the classical *tafṣīr*. The notion of a “rupture” brought about by modernity, as argued by Zaman, prevails in this regard, as in other fields of study focused on modern Islam.⁶⁷ The notable historian of modern *tafṣīr* literature, Johanna Pink, writes:

The last decades of the nineteenth century mark a *rupture* in the intellectual history of the Islamic world; like all areas of religious thought, *the Qur'anic sciences were strongly affected* [emphasis added]. Although scholars continued to write commentaries on the Qur'ān that were traditional in style and mostly also in content, a modernist trend emerged in this period that constituted a radical departure from the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis on several levels, including style, format, content, and

⁶⁷ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 7.

target audience. This early modern period was characterized by attempts to make Islam compatible with Western science and Western values. Besides, many intellectuals hoped that religious reform would enable the Islamic world to overcome its perceived backwardness and to shake off Western imperialism. Perhaps equally importantly, this period, which lasted roughly until the 1950s with regional divergences, witnessed the emergence of an educated elite that did not consist of religious scholars and was nonetheless active in the interpretation of religious sources.⁶⁸

My investigation of modern commentaries in British India, through this dissertation's three case studies and examination of additional *tafsīr* literature, brings to light a contrary picture, one that depicts the sustained and overwhelming influence of pre-modern philological and interpretive approaches to the text of the Qur'an. As popular exegetical resources to understand the scripture in the period after 1857, pre-modern Arabic *tafāsīr*, such as that of al-Bayḍāwī and of al-Suyūṭī and his teacher, thus continued to exert their influence to a considerable extent. These works did not fall from fashion, and remained part of the necessary *tafsīr* curriculum in madrasas. Moreover, these classical works also continued to be explicitly acknowledged in the introductions to their own Qur'an commentaries by many exegetes writing in British India. In addition, the classical Arabic lexicography, in the formation of which, according to many authors, the Qur'an and early exegesis played a key role⁶⁹, was part and parcel of the interpretive apparatus behind works that were being written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This widespread recourse is evident even in those works classified as strictly modernist.

In the case of Aḥmad Khān, he regarded the well-received classical works of Qur'anic exegesis, such as those of al-Rāzī and al-Bayḍāwī, as indispensable in any investigation aimed at

⁶⁸ Pink, "Striving for a new exegesis," 6.

⁶⁹ John A Haywood, *Arabic Lexicography: Its History, and its Place in the General History of Lexicography* (Leiden: Brill, 1965); C.H.M Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Ramzi Baalbaki, *The Arabic Lexicographical Tradition: From the 2nd/8th to the 12th/18th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

understanding the meaning of the words of the Qur'an in philological terms. His starting point to form his own opinions on different interpretive issues was earlier commentaries. On a considerable number of occasions, Aḥmad Khān's opinions were either the same as theirs or inclined to be the same. As we saw in the case of his determining the meaning of *malak*, his primary framework was to evaluate what pre-modern commentaries had said on this issue. In the case of Thānawī, his basic method of interpreting the Qur'an was to base himself on pre-modern commentaries, whose key titles he noted in the introduction to his *tafsīr* and cited consistently throughout his work. Whether it was a question of settling a philological issue or a semantic problem, he was thinking through the lens of the pre-modern *tafsīr*. In addition, in order to search for the context and background in which Qur'anic verses were supposed to be revealed, his reliance on earlier exegetical works never gave way to any other source.

In Farāhī, the thrust of his work was on developing a systematic procedure to arrive at an authentic interpretation of the Qur'an, and in this systematic procedure he gave pre-modern Arabic commentaries a special place. Although he privileged the text of the Qur'an as the primary basis of his interpretation, pre-modern commentaries held a permanent place in his methodology in two ways. First, his reliance on traditional commentaries was reflected even in the case of the most challenging Qur'anic sites to interpret, such as determining the meaning of the word *al-kawthar* in Q 108.⁷⁰ It was his investigation of the classical *tafsīr* that provided him the foundation for thinking about how to move ahead. Ultimately the result of his investigation, though apparently different in conclusion, was essentially based on what earlier commentaries had recorded as the meaning of the Qur'anic word, which was a hapax legomenon in the entire

⁷⁰ Q 108: "1 We have truly given abundance (*al-kawthar*) to you [Prophet]—2 so pray to your Lord and make your sacrifice to Him alone—3 it is the one who hates you who has been cut off."

text. All he did was to harmonize different streams of opinions on *al-kawthar* in order to argue for a different but converging meaning of the word. Second, on many occasions, when Farāhī interpreted a Qur’anic verse in a manner different from what was a popular opinion in colonial India, he would routinely indicate how sources in pre-modern commentaries supported his viewpoint. An evident example is how he treated the words *al-tīn* and *al-zaytūn*.

Beyond the above three cases, the use of pre-modern Arabic commentaries was widespread in other exegetical initiatives conceived in British India. Far from being symbolic, this usage was, in fact, decisive in shaping many an exegete’s efforts to interpret the Qur’an. Thus, whether it was the case of Qur’an commentaries emanating from the Sunni sectarian groups or emerging from particular regional settings, such as the Punjab, consulting pre-modern Arabic commentaries was part and parcel of these exegetical enterprises. Baljon in his study of modern Qur’anic hermeneutics thus erred in reading an interpretation of Q 95 by a less known author as a major break from the pre-modern exegetical tradition.⁷¹ He was mistaken on two grounds. First, this apparently radical interpretation was already recorded in some form in pre-modern commentaries, which he failed to recognize. Farāhī had developed this earlier position through methodological sophistication. Second, a similar interpretation, albeit in an undeveloped form, was already found in pre-modern works on the Qur’an such *Al-Tibyān fī Aqsām al-Qur’ān* by Ibn al-Qayyim.⁷² Such instances suggest that the heavy adoption of the notion of “rupture” has seriously limited our understanding of the modern genre of South Asian Qur’an commentary and by consequence, the modern commentary in general as well.

⁷¹ Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*, 28.

⁷² Ibn al-Qayyim, *Al-Tibyān fī Aqsām al-Qur’ān*, ed. °Abd Allāh bin Sālim al-Baṭāṭī (Dār °Alim al-Fawā°id, n.d.), 69-73. It is also entitled *Al-Tibyān fī Īmān al-Qur’ān*.

The only exception perhaps to this prevailing trend was the Qur'an commentary by Chakṛālwī. Whenever he mentioned the status of the pre-modern Arabic commentary, he meant to dismiss it as inauthentic and inappropriate in any effort to interpret the Qur'an. Yet I would provisionally argue that despite his dismissal of earlier exegetical sources, the larger canvas on which he drew his interpretation of the Qur'an was based on his individual understanding of the life of the Prophet which was ultimately based on traditional sources. The point is that traditional exegetical and other sources seem to have played a significant role in influencing a modern interpreter's methods of interpretation, no matter how much he aspires to make himself liberated from extra-Qur'anic sources.

The Holistic Understanding of the Qur'an

In a milieu of reform and polemics, attempts to understand the Qur'an in the post-Mutiny period were not simply limited to the understanding of its parts (or making connections between them) by developing specific methods of interpretation. Many of the exegetes, within their respective religious worldviews, were developing new ideas about the Qur'an as a whole. A new trend was emerging of developing a holistic understanding of the Qur'an. This trend of "holistic understanding" may remind us of Frederick Schleiermacher's notion of the hermeneutic circle, which is usually understood as a system of meaning whereby individual parts of a text determine the meaning of the text as a whole and then this idea of the whole text in turn shapes the meaning of its individual parts.⁷³ However, unlike Schleiermacher who was interested in developing a systematic procedure of interpretation, Muslim exegetes, who were sometimes

⁷³ On Schleiermacher and his method, see Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 151-153. Bruns introduces Schleiermacher's interpretive approach as stressing construction of a methodology in contrast to Hans Gadamer, author of *Truth and Method*, for whom hermeneutics was more an "experience" and reflection.

acting as reformers and activists in their multiple roles, were generally less interested in developing a very systematic method of interpretation around the idea of a holistic understanding of the Qur'an. In general, a holistic understanding could be defined, in the context of Qur'anic hermeneutics in colonial India, as a meta-approach or a larger characterization of the Qur'an which many exegetes expected their readers to keep in mind before opening the scripture for guidance and understanding. Our three key scholars and various other authors exemplified, in varying degrees, this aspect of evolving Qur'anic hermeneutics in India. While stressing this aspect of the Qur'an, some exegetes manifested more sophistication of thought than others.

In the case of Aḥmad Khān, the issue of a holistic understanding of the Qur'an can be seen, for instance, in his overall approach to how he understood the scripture. In particular, he accentuated two larger features of the Qur'an. First, it is the book revealed for the guidance of Muslims and mankind at large, as he explained in his interpretation of Q 2:23.⁷⁴ He disagreed with other Muslim exegetes that the verse was alluding to the inimitability of the Qur'an. He contended instead that the verse refers to the most basic feature of the Qur'an, that is, its guidance (*hidāyat*) for mankind. This idea of the book's serving as a source of guidance was not especially unique as that had always been understood to be the basic feature of the Qur'an throughout Muslim scholarly history, and the Qur'an itself on occasions reminds the reader of this being its basic purpose. Something new added by Aḥmad Khān, however, was his emphasizing this quality of the Qur'an, rather than its miraculous qualities like inimitability, which, to him, many of his contemporaries highlighted too much. Second, he stressed the notion of the compatibility of reason and revelation when reflecting on Qur'anic meanings. The debate

⁷⁴ Q 2:23 "If you have doubts about the revelation We have sent down to Our servant, then produce a single sura like it– enlist whatever supporters you have other than God– if you truly [think you can]."

between reason and revelation was old in Muslim intellectual history. But for Aḥmad Khān's times, this debate acquired a new colouring especially through his own insertion of modern sciences into it. These two larger ideas informed his approach to Qur'anic hermeneutics.

In the case of Thānawī, we have no clear idea of his seeing the Qur'an as a larger whole, except for his affirmation of the scripture's conventionally recognized feature of imparting guidance. The only thing that is arguable and what Thānawī himself accentuated was his viewing the Qur'an as helping someone on the path of a mystical journey. What he focused on in larger terms was guidance both for the common man and for the selected group of believers who were interested in Sufi path. In contrast to the pre-modern exegesis, in which mystical interpretation held sway in South Asia, this pattern of reading the Qur'an was seen as eclipsed by other interpretive approaches in the wake of social and intellectual changes occurring in British India. Why this medieval and early modern tendency diminished, despite Walī Allāh's personal inclination towards Sufism, and whether this tendency transmuted itself into new forms, is not a question we can investigate here. However, despite this possible lessening of mystical interpretations, Thānawī was immensely motivated to introduce to his readers the ways in which the Qur'an can help a traveller on the Sufi path. His *Masā'il al-Sulūk* seemed a popular text over many decades.

Farāhī, as always, was mostly interested in issues of method. Thus, developing an idea of the Qur'an as a whole was part and parcel of his hermeneutic system. His interpretive procedure was based on historically imagining the life of the Prophet Muḥammad. To Farāhī, an authentic sense of the life of the Prophet could be developed, not through the books of *Sīra*, but by reading individual parts of the Qur'an. This larger sense of his life, particularly in terms of different phases of his ministry, later informed Farāhī's approach to the text and helped him in

understanding parts and whole of the scripture. In short, his holistic understanding of the Qur'an was based on a specific idea of the life of the Prophet as a religious ministry that passed through different stages.

Other commentators also emphasized the holistic elements of the Qur'anic message. This larger understanding of the Qur'an was most evident in the case of activists emanating from the Punjab, such as Mashriqī and Sindhī. Mashriqī's work was a representative example of a holistic understanding of the Qur'an. He wrote:

I am certain that the Qur'an is matchless in terms of its comprehensiveness and meaningfulness, its argumentation and wisdom, and in its knowledge and information, and that it is beyond the highest level of possible human knowledge. All heavenly books present some aspects of the law of God and natural religion but only this unique scripture is presenting those topics in their completeness and perfection...It contains guiding and meaningful suggestions for every phase of civilization, every stage of society, every step in the way of progress. Its guiding finger is warning [about the path] that leads to harm, social decline, and ultimate death. Its command, without having an element of fear and danger, is for that straight path that leads to strength, eternity, blessing, and glory. Its most important focus is on the reform of nations.⁷⁵

Given these elements of his holistic thinking, Mashriqī read the injunctions for ritual prayers, apparently ordained for individuals, as part of a larger scheme. He interpreted the basic rationale for *ṣalāt* as fulfilling the purpose of such objectives as Muslim unity and the equality of a ruler and his subjects.⁷⁶

For the scholar-activist Sindhī, who was travelling through the Muslim cosmopolis of the early twentieth century and was imbued with the aim of Muslim revival, the Qur'an was a key to the solution of problems facing the Muslims of his times. Reflecting on the Qur'anic thought of

⁷⁵ Mashriqī, *Tadhkira*, vol. 1, 76.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 387-410.

Walī Allāh and his grandson, Ismā'īl Dihlawī, he stressed direct reflection on the Qur'an. To Sindhī, the Qur'an provided the necessary means towards progress for Muslims. While reading Sūrat al-Fātiḥa (Q 1)⁷⁷ as carrying the spirit of the Qur'an's message, he stressed the quality of the Qur'an as guiding people towards the highest level of social life. That is the reason, it has been suggested in Q 1 that those people who understand human nature and act accordingly should assemble themselves. Such a group of people will form the centre of human society and will guide this society. That is the reason that this sura has been given the shape of a benediction in which there is also the mention of human will and courage. This prayer is in fact offered in social terms.⁷⁸

Intellectual Transitions into the Post-Independence Period

Before we close our discussion of the period under study, it is pertinent to identify certain historical contexts and intellectual movements which were going to influence the Qur'anic thought in the post-colonial period. Future work on the post-1947 world can further substantiate and build on some of the cues noted here. We can readily identify three important currents here: continuation of and building on earlier trends in Qur'anic hermeneutics; sophistication in political Islamist thought; potential religious visions for the new nation-states of India and Pakistan. First, the decade of 1940s was already hinting at the movement of building Qur'anic thought on the works written in the colonial period. This was manifested in multiple contexts. Already in the Deoband tradition, °Uthmānī had laid the foundations of building on Thānawī and al-Ḥasan. Moreover, Thānawī's committed follower and the editor of many of his surviving

⁷⁷ Q 1 says: "1 In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! 2 Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Worlds, 3 the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, 4 Master of the Day of Judgement. 5 It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help. 6 Guide us to the straight path: 7 the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray."

⁷⁸ Sindhī, *Ilhām al-Raḥmān*, 44.

works, Muḥammad Shafī^c (1897-1976), underwent formative years of his intellectual formation in the colonial period and later wrote his influential commentary on the Qur'an, *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* in the tradition of his mentor's exegetical thought.⁷⁹ In the case of Farāhī, Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāhī (1904-1997) strongly held the methodological paradigms of his teacher and further developed his ideas to write his nine-volume commentary, *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, which was published in 1983 but whose parts appeared earlier in print in monthly journals.⁸⁰ The same trend of building on earlier intellectual movements of British India is seen in the work of Ghulām Aḥmad Parwēz (1903-1985) who was standing on the historical trajectory that had seen its intensification in Ahl al-Qur'an movements in the Punjab. Aligned with the same larger movement, he was conceiving interpreting the Qur'an without the aid of extra-scriptural resources. His commentary, *Maḥmūm al-Qur'ān*, appeared in the post-colonial period.⁸¹ This tendency of writing on the Qur'an within the framework of religious institutions and earlier movements was also seen in case of the Barēlwī school as well. The point is that post-1947 Qur'anic thought bore the imprint of the colonial period in many ways.

The second noticeable element in the context of the 1940s is the maturity of thought around political Islam that was in the offing from an earlier period in colonial India. This was manifested most conspicuously in the thought of Abū al-A'ālā Mawdūdī (1903-1979), parts of whose commentary, *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, had already been published around 1944.⁸² Thus, if we read his exegetical work in the vein of Sindhī and Mashriqī, who interpreted the Qur'an within

⁷⁹ Muftī Muḥammad Shafī^c, *Tafsīr Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān*, 8 vols. (Karachi: Idārat al-Ma'ārif, 2008). Originally published between 1969-1972.

⁸⁰ See chap. 5, n. 1.

⁸¹ Ghulām Aḥmad Parwēz, *Maḥmūm al-Qur'ān* (Lahore: Ṭulū^c-i Islām Trust, 2002). Originally published between 1961-1970.

⁸² See Sharf al-Dīn, *Qur'ān-i Ḥakīm kē Urdū Tarājum*, 357. For Mawdūdī's commentary, see Abū al-A'ālā Mawdūdī, *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān*, 6 vols. (Lahore: Maktaba Ta'āmīr-i Insāniyat, 1976). Mawdūdī began writing his work in 1942.

their larger worldviews, *Tafhūm* was a sophisticated work within Mawdūdī's larger thought on political Islam that ultimately saw its completion in the post-independence period.⁸³

Another visible element near the end of the colonial period was the participation of religious and political groups in the freedom struggle for India and Pakistan. Some members of the Deobandī, Barēlwī, and Ahl-i-Ḥadīth schools had chosen to participate in the struggle for freedom from the British rule, supporting either the idea of a united India or a separate Muslim state. The political activism around freedom struggle was manifested in the graduates of Aligarh College as well.⁸⁴ In what ways this participation in the struggle for independence and conflicting visions of the future character of the independent nations was linked to the understanding of the Qur'an is not a directly relevant question for the later development of Qur'anic hermeneutics. However, the question did hint at the discussions on the possible fate of the intellectual atmosphere that was going to be constructed in the new milieu of the post-independence world. This new intellectual atmosphere was dependent on how much influence the so-called traditionalist and modernist groups were going to exercise in the independent states of India and Pakistan. Was there going to be any possibility of further "heretics" like Aḥmad Khān to emerge in independent Pakistan and India? Thus, the political current in terms of power struggle among religious groups during the freedom movement pointed toward the possibility of multiple intellectual environments within which new experiments on Qur'anic hermeneutics and older currents could make their way or not. In short, if we recognize the factor of political currents in which future religious thought was at stake along with the above two currents that

⁸³ On Mawdūdī and the emerging thought on political Islam in the 1930s and 1940s, see Jan-Peter Hartung, *A System of Life: Mawdūdī and the Ideologisation of Islam* (London: Hurst & Co., 2013).

⁸⁴ For an introduction to the colonial milieu in which religion and Muslim politics were inter-mingled and which foresaw a new post-colonial world in the making, see Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb, eds., *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan* (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

were present in the context of colonial India, 1947 was carrying in its offing potential future developments in the domain of Qur'anic thought in South Asia.

The Muslim Intellectual Tradition and Modern Muslim Exegetes

The investigation of the history of ideas on Qur'anic hermeneutics in British India leads us to the question of why Muslim scholars were engaging with the Qur'an in the way they did. The key point is that underneath the debates on Qur'anic hermeneutics and the varied contexts that generated them, there laid a much larger issue that needs attention, and that is: how were different Muslim scholars assessing, responding to, and situating themselves within the centuries-long Muslim intellectual tradition? In other words, how were they viewing themselves in relation to this heritage? Analysis of the three case studies and the other works of *tafsīr* and Qur'anic hermeneutics reveals the evolving notions of what the Muslim tradition actually was in the opinions of Muslim scholars flourishing in British India. An understanding of these notions will help us grasp how different approaches to religious knowledge were developing in the modern period and how these approaches came to be conceptualized in the discourses on modern Islam in terms of understanding different types of scholars and their works in the Muslim world. In the formulation of these conceptualizations and the resulting typologies, Muslim scholars of British India of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Thānawī and Aḥmad Khān, figured in prominently. We can begin our investigation by briefly comparing and contrasting what the three key scholars were thinking about the history of the development of Qur'anic and other sciences in Muslim history. This will also help in better understanding the notion of Muslim tradition they had in their overall religious vision, a key element that impacted their Qur'anic scholarship.

The Qur'an projects of Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī were different in terms of their rationale and agenda. Regarding the need or rationale to launch their projects, it was both the larger context of nineteenth-century British India and the personal intellectual contexts of each individual exegete that influenced them to write on the Qur'an and related topics. Aḥmad Khān was influenced by the rising arguments about the compatibility or incompatibility between science and religion. He felt the need to write on the Qur'an due to his apprehension that if the issues of its interpretation were not systematically addressed, the next generation of Muslims would discard their faith in religion under the influence of modern education and the stress on scientific thinking. Other forces, such as inter-faith polemics, did contribute to rousing him to write on the Qur'an, but his primary motivation laid in his assessment of the emerging new times and the new episteme in which he found himself. By contrast, Thānawī did not ascribe any importance to the so-called rising tide of scientific thinking. The immediate context in which he authored his commentary was colonial India's emerging public sphere in which many translations of the Qur'an were appearing from the pens of "incapable" translators who in rendering the Qur'an into Urdu were deviating from the scripture's intended meanings. Moreover, he viewed some of the new ideas about the Qur'an, whether influenced by science or by other factors, as "heretical" due to their deviation from the previous Muslim scholarly tradition, a tradition which he imagined to have been uniform, or inclined toward convergence, or in harmony despite the fact that on some occasions, it gave rise to contradictory views on certain matters of Qur'anic interpretation and jurisprudence. For his part, Farāhī, in comparison to the other two, was more enigmatic in terms of the background that led him to launch his project. He did participate in the public scene of colonial India via his diverse educational experiences and exercises in institution-making, but he largely remained a solitary thinker who

hardly entered into any polemics with his opponents. Studying his career and work, it seems that he was influenced by nearly all the forces that were at play in colonial India, forces that could have a bearing on modern Muslim minds. His work hinted at the influence of historical criticism on his own thought, particularly in the way he approached the text of the Qur'an. The larger milieu, in which the questions of authentic Islam and the correct method to interpret it were the driving forces, led him to think about Islam in innovative ways from the very beginning. Farāhī had an added advantage in that he interacted with those who were the custodians of the old Delhi literary tradition, in which the understanding of the Qur'an was perhaps not so much dominated by inter-school rivalries.

The objectives of these three authors' Qur'an projects were comprised of developing ideas and principles regarding the interpretation of the Qur'an. All of them had different reasons to pursue their work on the Qur'an and a different agenda to fulfill. In the case of Aḥmad Khān, his Qur'anic investigations led him to retrace the origins of the development of the Islamic sciences in order to confirm what was possible in thinking about the Qur'an, something which Mohammad Arkoun's work discusses as well.⁸⁵ Aḥmad Khān's touchstone for accepting or rejecting ideas coming from the traditions of the Islamic sciences was their compatibility with an emerging sense of rationality in colonial India. He applied this new sense of rationality based on critical inquiry to investigate what had been said before on social and moral issues as well as on scriptural interpretation. For Thānawī, there was no need to trace the origins of the development of the Islamic sciences in the tradition as he took for granted that this development had already occurred on reliable lines. Thus, in essence, despite certain disagreements, the tradition carried a common core of agreed upon opinions in the realms of exegesis, *fiqh*, theology, and Ḥadīth. The

⁸⁵ Mohammad Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

only need was to elaborate or, in exegetical terms, to amplify meanings and interpretations recorded in pre-modern books of Qur'anic exegesis and in other disciplines of the Islamic sciences. Farāhī, in comparison and contrast to the other two, had a very different approach to this whole question of the development of the Islamic sciences. Like Aḥmad Khān, he too wanted to trace their origins and development in order to understand the Qur'an in particular and Islam in general. However, like Thānawī, he had a firm belief in the Muslim scholarly tradition that had developed over time. In Farāhī's opinion, this tradition only needed to be fixed on certain seminal moments in its evolutionary trajectory but did not require a wholesale program of rethinking. His biographers therefore introduced him as quite a strict conservative scholar who was averse to thinking everything Islamic anew. The facet of Farāhī's thought that may mislead some observers of modern Islam to characterize him as a modernist is his quest for a method that can result in some conclusions that may be untenable for traditionalists. But in his methods and conclusions, he viewed himself as thoroughly rooted in his religious tradition.

Conceptualizing Muslim Thought in Colonial India

Having studied the Qur'anic thought of different scholars and their approaches to the evolution of the Muslim intellectual tradition, we are in a better position to evaluate how the work of Muslim scholars in the modern period, particularly from the latter half of the nineteenth century, has been conceptualized and how this work of conceptualization has resulted in the emergence of the oft-repeated dichotomous typology contrasting "traditionalists" (encompassing the *‘ulamā’*) and "modernists" (including those trained in modern educational institutions). Below I analyze, evaluate, and offer my position on this issue. The central element I would like to focus on is the notion of "tradition" in such typologies. For a closer analysis, Zaman's work, which is useful for multiple reasons, can be the basis of our analysis. His work at many levels is

a sophisticated statement of the current conceptualizations of different Muslim scholars. Moreover, his is the main work, after Barbara Metcalf's, that offers a focused study of the nature of the *'ulamā'* and other types of scholars in both British India and the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan. Zaman's work has been well received in the discussions on traditionalism and modernism in South Asian Muslim settings; indeed, for some it has marked a paradigm shift in our study of modern Islam in colonial India.⁸⁶

In considering the nature of the Muslim intellectual tradition, my task is not to offer a new definition of what tradition is. Instead, I am interested in seeing how historians have conceptualized Muslim scholars and their works in their relation to "tradition," which seems an essential basis of their typologies, and how Muslim scholars in colonial India were actually seeing themselves in relation to this heritage. We may begin by noting the basic sense of the word, "tradition," which is understood to mean "anything which is transmitted or handed from the past to the present."⁸⁷ In other words, the notion of continuity with the past is always stressed in conceptualizing a tradition. Zaman, in his seminal study of the *'ulamā'* in colonial India, begins his analysis by drawing upon certain important conceptualizations of what "tradition" is. Directly examining his application of earlier theoretical positions on this notion is important to appreciate my point and to contrast it to his and other academic positions. Zaman builds on the ideas of William Graham, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Talal Asad on the nature of tradition in general and, by its application, of the Muslim religious tradition in particular. Consider briefly how Zaman uses Graham:

⁸⁶ SherAli Tareen, "Deoband Madrasa," in *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies*, Online Edition. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780195390155-0019.

⁸⁷ Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12.

Historian of religion William Graham has argued that “traditionalism” ought to be seen as a defining feature of Islamic thought. This traditionalism consists, he says, “not in some imagined atavism, regressivism, fatalism, or rejection of change and challenge,” but rather in the conviction that “a personally guaranteed connection with a model past, and especially with model persons, offers the only sound basis . . . for forming and reforming one’s society in any age.”⁸⁸

Next, he borrows from MacIntyre for his key usage of the term “tradition”:

To MacIntyre, tradition is, quite simply, “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” Traditions may be more or less successful in asking new questions or satisfactorily answering old ones, in meeting the challenges posed to their adherents and in adapting to change; but what remains key to their constitution as traditions is a history of argument and debate over certain fundamental doctrines in shared languages and styles of discourse.⁸⁹

In his final analysis before he moves on to apply these concepts to the Muslim religious tradition and scholarship, Zaman makes Talal Asad, who built his ideas on MacIntyre, his strong basis of analysis. He thus draws upon Asad’s idea of Muslim tradition as a

“discursive tradition.” Asad writes:

What is a tradition? A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a

⁸⁸ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 3. Zaman’s quote borrows from William A. Graham, “Traditionalism in Islam: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 522, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/206100>.

⁸⁹ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 4. Zaman builds on Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.⁹⁰

We can also refresh our memory with the following definitions of “traditionalists” and “modernists” that Zaman offered based on his analysis of what has been said on the notion of tradition. On the ‘*ulamā*’ as the received traditionalists in the Muslim world, Zaman writes:

The ‘ulama, as I show in this book, are hardly frozen in the mold of the Islamic religious tradition, but this tradition nevertheless remains their fundamental frame of reference, the basis of their identity and authority. They differ widely in the extent of their actual acquaintance with this tradition... boundaries between the ‘ulama and “modernists” can become blurred, just as they sometimes do between the ‘ulama and the Islamists. Yet, in general terms, it is a combination of their intellectual formation, their vocation, and, crucially, their orientation viz., *a certain sense of continuity with the Islamic tradition* that defines the ‘ulama as ‘ulama; and it is *this sense of continuity that constitutes the most significant difference* between them and their modernist and Islamist detractors.⁹¹

My emphasis in the above quote highlights that for Zaman it is the continuity with the tradition that made thinkers like Thānawī traditionalists. By the same token, non-traditionalists like Aḥmad Khan would be arguing for a break with the tradition. About modernist intellectuals, who represent this break with the tradition, Zaman notes:

More often than not, however, the effort has been to retrieve the teachings of “true” Islam from the vast and oppressive edifice that centuries of “sterile” scholasticism, “blind” imitation of earlier authorities, and the “intransigence” of the religious specialists had built. In general, the modernist project is guided by the assurance that once retrieved through a fresh but “authentic” reading of the foundational texts, and especially of the Qur’an, the teachings of Islam would appear manifestly in concord with the positions recommended by liberal rationalism.⁹²

⁹⁰ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14.

⁹¹ Zaman, *Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 10; emphasis added.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

Based on the current study that was focused on British India, my understanding of modern Muslim scholars in terms of their work, their reform projects, and their own perceived relationship with the tradition stands in contrast to this whole edifice of ideas around the nature of the Muslim tradition and scholarship as hitherto understood in the academy. I explain below my positions in contrast to how current conceptualizations work.

The previous chapters of this dissertation have argued that the notion of a break with the tradition attributed to modernists is illusory. The so-called “modernists” on most occasions did not think of themselves in this fashion. The matter was far more complex than these typologies and their underlying notion of “a continuity with the past” can grasp. This understanding by Zaman and others of the Muslim tradition builds on definitions of tradition which do not bring the issue of the unity and diversity of a tradition into sharp relief, though they mention this in some nuanced ways. Zaman’s treatment, instead, gives the impression that the Muslim tradition tended to be coherent and unified or featured some fundamental agreements, despite its considerable internal criticism and that the traditionalists in colonial India were the loyal “custodians” of that tradition (which also depicted change), and the modernists rebelled against it. In such a conceptualization, other ways of understanding a tradition are not accentuated enough. Edward Shils, a notable theorist of the idea of tradition, had a different view of the functioning of the historical dynamic called tradition. Shils emphasized change rather than uniformity or continuity in his conception of tradition. He noted:

Traditions are indispensable; they are also very seldom entirely adequate. Their sheer existence disposes those who possess them to change them. The person who possesses a tradition and who depends on it is also impelled to modify it because it is not good enough for him, even though he could never have accomplished for himself what the tradition has enabled him to do. We could say that traditions change because they are never good enough for some of those who have received them. *New*

*possibilities previously hidden are perceivable when a tradition enters into a new state [emphasis added].*⁹³

Shils further wrote:

[The inheritors of a tradition] accept what is given to them by the past but they do so gracelessly for the most part. The acquisition from the past furnishes their home but it is very seldom a home in which they are entirely at ease. They try to bend it to their own desires; they sometimes discard or replace some of the inherited furniture.⁹⁴

In comparison to Shils, the theorists that Zaman relies on do note the possibility and elements of change, but they tend to impart the impression that such changes and internal conflicts have little or no real impact on the imagined unity or continuity of a tradition. There is no picking and choosing in my analysis of Zaman's use of the earlier conceptualizations of tradition and my own marshalling of competing voices on the theory of tradition. Instead, my analysis highlights the two basic approaches upon which the notion of tradition has been founded. Building on Terry Eagleton's ideas, the following words of Gerald Bruns', a leading theorist of the concept of hermeneutics, encapsulate to a considerable extent what I want to say in terms of how traditionalists and modernists were imagining themselves in relation to their intellectual tradition in colonial India:

...the question is not how do we analyze and interpret but how do we respond to hermeneutical situations (or any situation in which we find ourselves)? A critical form of this question is: How do we stand with respect to all that comes down to us from the past? In our own time we have brought this question under the rule of an analytical distinction between the *hermeneutics of faith* and the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, that is, between interpretation as recollection or retrieval and interpretation as unmasking or emancipation from mental bondage. *The one seeks to overcome the alienation of forgetfulness or of historical or cultural difference; the other seeks to produce this alienation where historical and cultural difference has been repressed in favor of institutionalized systems or doctrines that claim to speak all at once or once for all.*⁹⁵

⁹³ Shils, *Tradition*, 213.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Bruns, "What is Tradition?" in *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 195-196; emphasis added.

This notion of change within a tradition, as it has been understood, seems fundamental and cannot legitimately be explained away in order to hastily affirm the agreements (or some kind of continuity despite disagreements) within a tradition, as it appears to be the case with Zaman's analysis. Most importantly, this ever-present phenomenon of change is reflected in the claims of orthodoxy and accusations of heresy in a tradition. The emergence of orthodoxy and heretical ideas at any given point in the history of a tradition, including the Islamic, seems to be an inevitable product of historical forces, and thus, there seems to be no permanent orthodoxy and heresy. This is exactly the facet of the Muslim intellectual tradition that Aḥmad Khān, and also Farāhī to some extent, were trying to highlight. This is the very facet that Aḥmad Khān wanted to illuminate when he brought to sharp relief the person of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), a "heretic" for many in his own times and an "established figure" in the Muslim thought of later periods. What Aḥmad Khān said on this was emblematic of such phenomena in the Muslim tradition. He explained the context of the writing of al-Ghazālī's book, *Faysal Al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa*, a context validated by Nuḥmānī as well in his work *Al-Ghazālī*, in the following words:

One of those who came out of the popular flow of *taqlīd* ("following earlier opinions") and participated bravely in the sphere of seeking truth was Imām Ghazālī also. Being separated from popular opinions and walking with care have always resulted in scorn and scold by those who tread run-of-the-mill paths...In the same manner, Imām Ghazālī was also criticized by those who were having such common opinions. Verdicts were given against him for being a *kāfir* ("disbeliever" or "infidel"); his murder was termed as permissible (*mubāḥ*); and his books were ordered to be burnt. Nonetheless, he became popular (*maqbul*) after a certain period of time and has remained so afterwards.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, "Al-Tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa par aēk Naẓar" in *Maqālāt-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. Ismā'īl Pānīpatī, vol. 3 (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1984), 112.

In my opinion, this is exactly what Talal Asad was also implying, in an articulation which surely could be interpreted in multiple ways,⁹⁷ but which did not perhaps grab the attention of Zaman in his theorization of Muslim scholarship in colonial India. Underlying Asad's idea of "discursive tradition" is the notion of orthodoxy and orthopraxy that he thought can emerge wherever and whenever there is the possibility of instituting any ritual and doctrine through power. He noted: "Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy."⁹⁸ What all this hints at is that scholars like Aḥmad Khān did not see an agreed upon uniformity or continuity in the Muslim intellectual tradition of the kind that Zaman to some extent privileged and that the iconic traditionalists such as Thānawī imagined. Using traditional sources to understand legal, interpretive, and ritual issues is one thing, but claiming that there was one perpetual strand of consensual opinion on these issues is another matter. Aḥmad Khān had to convey an important idea in this case:

One should say that any consensus among Muslims [on a certain issue] that is not based on the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet has no substantial value in an argument. However, [the history of Muslim thought shows that] any matter that has not been [discussed or] mentioned in the Qur'an or sayings of the Prophet⁹⁹ never universally gained an agreed-upon status through consensus.¹⁰⁰

The crux of the matter is that traditional sources were being used by all stripes of Muslim scholars, but it was a polemical and social tactic by the so-called traditionalists to construct their religious authority by presenting themselves as the custodians of an imagined unified strand of authentic Islam amidst a plethora of diverse or "heretical" opinions. But there existed other

⁹⁷ For a particular reading of Asad, see Ovamir Anjum, "Islam as a Discursive Tradition: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 656-672, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/224569>.

⁹⁸ Asad, *Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 15.

⁹⁹ Aḥmad Khān termed the matters that the Qur'an and ḥadīths do not discuss as *masā'il-i ghayr manṣūṣa*.

¹⁰⁰ Aḥmad Khān, "Dāfi' al-Buhtān," 35.

competing views of what the Muslim tradition was and how it had evolved over centuries. Ahmad Khan had a different view of his intellectual heritage, and his appeal to his opponents was to appreciate that there had always been disagreements and negotiations in the Muslim tradition, even if his opponents were reluctant to acknowledge this point in the manner he wanted them to. What he was asking for was a dialogue on the controversial issues dealing with theological and legal matters rather than a flood of verdicts of excommunication that were rampant in his times even between traditionalists.

In short, Aḥmad Khān was reflecting on the historical development of this intellectual tradition from its very formative moments down to his own times, and he discovered a Muslim tradition in this process that, to him, was always changing over centuries, accommodating itself repeatedly to the contemporary intellectual challenges of every age. This did not mean that for Aḥmad Khān this tradition was chaotic or incoherent. But its coherence was based on change. By contrast, Thānawī's view of the Muslim tradition, despite his acknowledging of change in its history, was based on his idea of a harmony that subsisted underlying the surface of controversies and debates in the tradition. Thus, to him, there was a persisting essence underneath change.

Farāhī's view of the development of the Muslim religious tradition, which was different in its nuances from Aḥmad Khān's and Thānawī's, was based on his historical imagining of earlier periods of Muslim intellectual history. Farāhī especially focused on the formative moments of the tradition in order to review the very foundations of the Muslim sciences. His view was similar to Aḥmad Khān's in the sense that he too believed in the phenomenon of change occurring continuously within the tradition. For both of them, every notable work and idea that had emerged in the Muslim tradition was valuable, but also always open for debate and

discussion, as indeed it had been throughout the Muslim history. In other words, in rethinking Islam, they were producing the very core dynamic of their intellectual heritage.

The above analysis allows us to identify the underlying problem in the current conceptualizations of Muslim scholars of colonial India and possibly of the contemporary period now. Views of who was or is a “traditionalist” and who a “modernist” have been based on either implicit or explicit acceptance of the ways traditionalists like Thānawī thought about themselves and their opponents in relation to the tradition. In other words, academic conceptualizations, like Zaman’s, have apparently succumbed to the inter-sectarian polemics rather than being based on how individual Muslim scholars actually thought about themselves and their tradition. In a way, the dominant discourse has internalized such polemics in its understanding of modern Islam. Thus, I would argue that “modernists” like Aḥmad Khan and Farāhī came to be conceptualized as such in the light of the censures hurled at them by scholars like Thānawī. And vice versa, “traditionalists” like Thānawī are looked upon by the discourse as traditionalists due to the criticisms their opponents hurled at them for their own “sterile” positions. Modernists were criticizing traditionalists for their adhering to *taqlīd* despite the fact that the latter actually exhibited quite a bit of creativity throughout their intellectual history, and the claim that traditionalists were clinging to medieval Islam was historically very flawed, as Zaman’s work successfully shows in the case of its study of the *‘ulamā’* in colonial India.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Muslim scholars’ characterizations of each other are even wrong in the case of those termed Salafīs, Wahhābīs or Ahl-i Ḥadīth (also sometimes labelled as fundamentalists or Islamists). It is often said that the Salafīs and the Ahl-i Ḥadīth routinely discard traditionalist opinions on religious issues and instead resort to the first century of Islam for understanding religion, proclaiming thus that they recover the “pure” Islam instead of an Islam based on *taqlīd*. Inviting us to revisit our current positions, Jonathan Brown had insightfully highlighted how earlier positions continued to play a role in the thought of those who are labelled Ahl-i Ḥadīth. Jonathan A. C. Brown, “Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not? Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (May 2015): 117–144, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etu081>.

This confusion of categories surfaces in Zaman's work at another level when he turns to scholars within the Deobandī tradition who were criticizing their own school on religious and political positions, and who sometimes detached themselves in some way from it, such as in the cases of famous members of the Deobandī 'ulamā' like Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī and 'Ubayd Allāh Sindhī in colonial India.¹⁰² On this point, Zaman probably resorts to MacIntyre's idea of internal criticism within a tradition. He characterizes such individuals as "internal critics" of the Muslim tradition. The question is: by what standard can one decide that someone is an internal critic or an enemy? My analysis suggests that both Aḥmad Khān and Farāhī could be called internal critics. However, there seems to be an essential problem with this label of "internal critic" as well. It already assumes that there was a superior "custodian" of the tradition with whom these internal critics were disagreeing. I would say that there was (and is) neither a custodian nor any internal critic in the Muslim tradition. These labels have been (and are) emerging in intra-faith polemics. In the end, I would reiterate that the labels that were being hurled at each other within the social and sectarian polemics of British India have been internalized and reproduced in the form of typologies in the discourses on the study of modern Islam, typologies that have seriously impeded our understanding of modern Muslim scholarship as it evolved from the latter half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁰² Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on studying the historical development of Qur'anic hermeneutics in British India in the period after the events of 1857 until the formation of the independent states of India and Pakistan. There were two main subjects to which it contributes: the history of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics and the evolution of Qur'anic thought in South Asia. Linked to these two subjects is a third area of academic scholarship, namely, that focused on the larger understanding of the nature of modern religious thought, and by consequence, of modern Islam. Thus, the dissertation also investigated the ancillary question of how modern Muslim South Asian scholars conceived their relationship with the Muslim intellectual tradition in terms of their continuity or discontinuity with it.

Regarding interpretations of the development of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics, I have contested current understandings in terms of both method and findings. The earlier focus in the scholarship has mostly been either on the dynamics of Muslim reform and revivalism or on a "rupture" caused by modernity, despite nominal acknowledgements that privileging such dynamics could be misleading in explaining what was occurring in the field of hermeneutics. Moreover, more stress was typically placed on reading an individual commentary through the lens of certain themes. By focusing on North India as a cultural region, I have shown that following Quentin Skinner's approach to writing the history of ideas brings to light the complexity of Muslim thought centred on the Qur'an. This complexity only becomes discernible when we give more weight to the local and the global contexts, the overall thought of individual scholars, and the larger nexus within which individual Muslim scholars interacted. By adopting this focus, I have been able to chart continuities and shifts along a historical trajectory. In contrast to current widespread understandings, continuities with the pre-modern exegetical

tradition appeared to me to be of more significance in certain regards than changes connected with the modern thought centred on the Qur'an.

On the subject of Qur'anic scholarship in South Asia, there was previously a paucity of material to engage with. In this regard, the dissertation has attempted to carve some original space for grounding current and future analysis. I have narrowed my focus to Qur'anic hermeneutics instead of writing a broad history of *tafsīr* precisely as a first step to opening up this latter potential area of inquiry. By orienting ourselves with materials from pre-modern South Asian Qur'anic scholarship, identifying some key contexts within which modern Qur'anic thought was struggling to take birth, and focusing on the larger thought of and exchanges between individual Muslim scholars, I have sought to bring to light a fascinating world of Muslim scholarship. The findings have helped me paint a portrait of the complex intellectual world that existed within British India. The Qur'an, it seems to me, was a conceptual tool by which Muslim scholars negotiated the changing world around them. It served as a means to meet the challenges brought forth by ideas emerging in multiple contexts. I see such contexts along three dimensions: inter- and intra-faith rivalries; the crisis of religious authority; and issues of epistemology in the domain of religious knowledge. Within these contexts, Muslim engagements with the Qur'an were often rooted in larger projects driven by different aims. Despite the diversity of these aims, the common underlying dynamic that informed these projects was the desire on the part of Muslim scholars like Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī to allow the Muslim community to feel at ease with its faith and its religious intellectual heritage. Whatever their views of this intellectual heritage, Muslim scholars were envisaging their projects within this legacy. Thus, their engagements with the Qur'an were part of their religious consciousness

as members of a broader community, a consciousness that was based on re-imagining different moments of their intellectual history.

Modern Muslim ideas on the Qur'an in South Asia were diverse and complex, but two features of this thought stand out. These features encapsulate the essence of different ideas that we synthesized in Chapter Six. First, it was through historical imagining of the first century of Islam and reinterpretation of historical narratives that Muslim scholars in post-1857 North India were able to see and understand the Qur'an in new light. This historical imagining enabled them to rethink the history of the Qur'an, conceive new ideas of *nazm*, and settle debates on the literal and the figurative meanings of Muslim scripture by imagining different types of its historical audiences. Moreover, this historical imagining also facilitated the development of their religious worldviews around the Qur'an as we saw in the case of their forging of holistic understandings of the Qur'an. There were several options to develop a specific religious weltanschauung out of the Qur'an: seeing it as a document for social cohesion; finding a manifesto for revolution in it; or reading it in the manner of the first generation of Muslims for discovering "pure" Islam. All such options were ultimately linked with Muslim scholars' imagining of the early moments of Islamic history and with their views on the later history.

The second feature that informed the modern work on the Qur'an in South Asia was the idea of continuity with the past exegetical tradition. This continuity was constructed in multiple ways: by attempting to root the modern ideas on Qur'anic hermeneutics in the pre-modern exegesis; by staying silent about the tradition on controversial issues without challenging it; or by understanding the Qur'an in the background of a heritage of intellectual debates on its meaning, an approach informed by a perceived dynamic tradition of thought. In the light of my findings, reading modern Qur'anic hermeneutics in the regional setting of South Asia challenges

our current knowledge of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics which seems somewhat outdated and in need of revisiting, at least in terms of the way the current discourse conveys the story of the history of modern Qur'anic thought.

Linked to the above issues is the discourse on modern Muslim thought that conceptualizes the relationship of the work of modern scholars with the Muslim intellectual tradition, a relationship whose understanding lies at the heart of academic work on modern Islam. Such work has nurtured the ubiquitous presence of the dichotomy of “traditionalists” and “modernists” with which we are accustomed to understanding modern Muslim scholarship as it developed from the nineteenth century, particularly from its latter half. Why the current discourse on modern Qur'anic hermeneutics placed more stress on change than continuity can be explained by the tendency to see the Muslim intellectual culture starkly divided between the views of the *‘ulamā’* and those of their counterparts, the so-called modernists. Change belonged to the modernists, the opponents of “tradition,” and continuity belonged to the *‘ulamā’*, the “custodians” of the intellectual legacy. My investigation of British India as a seminal period of intellectual culture portrays a very different picture. The desire to link oneself with the past intellectual tradition was widespread in the decades from 1857 to 1947. On most occasions, antagonists and protagonists in a debate both imagined themselves in a continuity with past traditions of Muslim thought. However, the central element of this relationship that has heretofore escaped our understanding, or that has not been emphasized enough, was the multiplicity of ways in which Muslim thinkers understood this tradition and its historical development. Current discourse on modern Islam does not deal enough with this question of how Muslim scholars of various stripes were imagining the development of their intellectual history. For the scholars of Thānawī's orientation, this tradition had an unimpeachable common

thread that they were committed to preserve. For intellectuals thinking on the lines of Aḥmad Khān, the tradition depicted diversity of opinion and was open to debate and controversy, despite having some agreed-upon elements in it. In Farāhī, we can see some kind of synthesis emerging. He thought that it was better to come out of this polemical struggle between traditionalists and modernists and proceed by acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses in the intellectual tradition as it developed over time.

As a last point in the light of the above review, I would object to the very idea that there was any separate religious class called the “*‘ulamā*” in contrast to the so-called modernists in late nineteenth-century British India. How such a reified notion has impacted our understanding of different types of Muslim scholars in the modern period is a question whose answer can be further pursued based on the positions taken in my research. The answer will depend on how one understands the history of Muslim education in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere in the Muslim world. The “*‘ulamā*” as a class was a pre-modern artefact (not in a derogatory sense) that had been resuscitated by modern groups like Deoband who framed themselves as the custodians of the sacred tradition in a polemical struggle with contenders such as Aḥmad Khān and others they considered “heretics,” whose approach to the Qur’an nonetheless was equally rigorous and “traditional.” Had such a struggle happened in the pre-modern period, it would have been seen by Deobandīs in the modern period as part of their “authentic” tradition. In such a hypothetical situation, some Deobandīs as internal critics would have sided with Aḥmad Khān on certain matters of Qur’anic interpretation or theology. And Farāhī would have remained an enigma in such a story. Thus, I would conclude by raising the question: Can we understand Thānawī, Aḥmad Khān, and Farāhī in some collective fashion other than labelling some of them as part of “the *‘ulamā*” class and others as the products of their age, and thus, “modernists”? In

the final analysis, all three linked themselves in multiple ways with the same intellectual heritage within which one alone has been discursively separated or conceptualized as the “custodian” of “the tradition” in too much of academic discourse. In other words, in my view, Aḥmad Khān, Thānawī, and Farāhī were all part of “the ‘*ulamā*’ class” in the modern period, if we read them beyond the polemical strife in which their own religious authority was at stake.

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