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**'ASSOCIATING' WITH GOD IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MUSLIM INTERPRETATIONS OF *SHIRK***

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Declaration

I confirm that this thesis has been composed by myself and is my own work. It has not been submitted, in whole or part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented in the following pages is entirely my own.

Josef Linnhoff
Ph.D. Candidate

Acknowledgments

This project started a long time ago, and, it often feels, in a galaxy far, far away. It was Autumn 2015. David Cameron was Prime Minister. Obama was President. The term ‘Brexit’ did not exist. It was a simpler time. Politics aside, it is impossible to work on a single piece of work for such a long period without amassing an enormous amount of gratitude and debt. In no particular order, I would like to thank my colleagues at Semples; Amy Plender, Ryan Tafilowski, Cameron Clausing, Steven Stiles, Tom Breimaier, George Walters-Sleyon. Each of these colleagues offered much needed laughs, support and friendship. They were exceptionally bright and passionate colleagues from whom I learnt a great deal. If I ever find another working environment like Semples, I will have done very well indeed. But I shall not be holding my breath.

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Notes on transliteration and translation

Qur'anic citations are taken, with slight alterations, from the English translation of M.A.S Haleem, *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Following Haleem, I prefer to use the English 'God' over the Arabic *Allāh*. The exception is in the relevant discussion in Chapter One ('Reflections on *shirk* in the Qur'an'), where the Arabic *Allāh* is used to reinforce the theological point that both the Prophet and his opponents, the *mushrikūn*, worship the same divinity. Also, against Haleem, relevant Qur'anic verses are translated in their basic, etymological sense of '*shirk*' or to 'associate' with God.

For presentation purposes to avoid an overly-cluttered text, all dates are provided in line with the Gregorian C.E. (Common Era) calendar.

For the translation and transliteration of Arabic terms, I follow the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES), with the exception of some important adjustments. These include:

- If an Arabic term has come to be widely used in English language, such as Qur'an or Sufi, I prefer to omit diacritical marks like hamzas and 'ayns. It is a firm belief that a term like 'Qur'an' is now firmly embedded in the English language. This involves a degree of subjectivity as to which terms can be considered as such, for which the readers understanding is sought.
- In the same spirit the name of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, is used without diacritics.
- All other Arabic/Islamic terms and phrases are transliterated in line with IJMES guidelines. This includes 'ayns, hamzas and diacritical marks. It includes the names of all other historical figures and thinkers, titles of sources, books and institutions.
- To preserve the integrity of the secondary sources, however, different transliteration systems are faithfully recorded when cited in this study. (for example: Qur'ān, Muḥammad).
- I choose to use anglicized plurals to assist readers not familiar with the broken plural in Arabic. The sole exception is '*ulamā*' (scholars) to convey the plural of scholar ('*ālim*).
- For adjectives taken from Arabic terms, I use 'ī'. For example: Salafī, Mu'tazilī, Ash'arī, Ḥanbalī). The sole exception is Khārijite, to reflect the irregular Arabic *khawārij*.
- Blessings that traditionally accompany mention of the both the Prophet and God, such as 'peace be upon him' (*ṣallā 'llāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam*) in Muslim sources, both English and Arabic, are omitted.
- I choose to spell out 'ibn' rather than shorten this to b. to indicate 'son of'.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the meaning of *shirk* or ‘association’ with God in Islamic thought. The concept of *shirk* is integral to Islam. The Qur’an specifies *shirk* or ‘associating’ partners to God as the ultimate doctrinal sin (Q 4:48). Yet we await a serious and sustained analysis of what *shirk* means to Islamic thought and how the idea of ‘associating’ with God has been conceived across Muslim intellectual history. This thesis contributes an in-depth scholarly treatment of the topic. It examines the roots of the doctrine of *shirk* in the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet before examining the place and meaning of *shirk* in the works of a number of post-classical and modern Muslim figures, from Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb (d. 1792), Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) to Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966). Each chapter is rooted in a close reading of their writings, a study of their historical and intellectual contexts, methodologies and approach to the Islamic tradition and the Muslim communities of their age. In so doing, this thesis reveals that while the Qur’anic command to avoid *shirk* is a major theme, the very nature of ‘association’ has been frequently reinterpreted by different Muslim thinkers, each in line with their particular contexts. Exploring Muslim conceptions of *shirk*, even within this narrow sampling of figures, opens a rich and hitherto under-explored area of enquiry. This thesis ultimately uncovers an image of *shirk* as a central yet multifaceted and highly dynamic concept in Islamic thought, and argues that there is no one single understanding or definition of the concept.

Introduction

Islamic intellectual history can be understood as a gradual unfolding of the manner in which successive generations of men have understood the meaning and implications of professing God's unity. Theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, Sufism, even to some degree the natural sciences, all seek to explain at some level the principle of *tawhid*, "To profess that god is One."¹

In recent years the world has witnessed the destruction of ancient heritage sites in different parts of the Islamic world. The demolition of the famous Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 first shed light on a phenomenon quickly dubbed 'Islamic iconoclasm.'² Similar acts have taken place at sites associated with Sufi or Shī'ī tradition across north and central Africa, Pakistan and beyond.³ Most recent and shocking has been the destruction of shrines and ancient heritage sites in Iraq and Syria, including the famed site of Palmyra, by the group known as Islamic State (IS). Many observers questioned why IS directed men and resources from the battlefield to focus on destroying historical artefacts. In their publications and online rhetoric, however, IS were clear: these actions reflected the groups commitment to removing from Muslim lands all traces of *shirk*, a term commonly translated as idolatry or polytheism. In February 2015, an unnamed IS fighter stood before ancient relics outside the city of Mosul and declared:

O Muslims! Indeed, these relics behind me are but idols (*aṣnām*) from the people of previous centuries that were worshipped in place of Almighty God. What we call the Ashurians, Assyrians, Arkadians and others, used to take these (false) gods for rain, provision and war. They committed *shirk* with these gods (*yushrikūn*) with Almighty God...And God Most High says; 'We never sent any messenger before you without revealing to Him: there is no god but Me, so serve Me' (Q 21:25).⁴

The reaction to these events was unsurprising, including from the Islamic world. Muslim scholars noted that such heritage sites had been preserved by Muslims for centuries and argued that Islam in no way sanctioned the destruction of historical treasures. In a widely-circulated refutation of IS, published in both Arabic and English, the Syrian scholar Muḥammad al-Ya'qūbī writes:

Destroying mosques, pillaging graves and dishonouring the sanctity of God...ISIS provides as justification the claim that these sacred places contain symbols of idolatry and innovation. (But) it should be noted that Muslims have never believed that erecting mausoleums for the Prophets and saints equates to apportioning divinity to them; hence this groups destruction...are heinous crimes based on a faulty reasoning and primitive understanding of Islamic monotheism...Destroying sites of cultural significance,

¹ Allāmah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī. *A Shi'ite Anthology*, trans. William Chittick (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 23.

² See Finbarr Barry Flood. 'Between Cult and Culture; Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm and the Museum', *The Art Bulletin* 84:4 (2002); 641-659. Jamal J. Elias. '(un)Making Idolatry; from Mecca to Bamiyan', *Future Anterior; Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory and Criticism* 4:2 (2007); 12-29.

³ See Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves in Salafi Islam; iconoclasm, destruction and idolatry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). James Noyce, *The Politics of Iconoclasm; Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁴ T. Neinawa. *Tadmīr Da'īsh al-jahal al-irhāb li-mutāḥaf al-Mūṣul al-ḥuḍārī bi-hājat 'ibādat al-aṣnām?!!!* (26 Feb 2015). Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcGfyeBY-7c> (Accessed 12 March 2016).

ISIS is bent on destroying any remnant of culture in the region, notable examples being their demolition of important artefacts from the World Heritage site of Palmyra.⁵

Less noted was the apparent tension between an acclaimed aversion to images and idols by IS, on the one hand, with a sophisticated use of social media and technology to spread images of their destruction to a global audience.⁶ Whatever the motivation behind these acts, the theological language and narrative invoked to justify this destruction was clear. Invoking the authority of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet, IS styled its actions as reflecting a central injunction of the faith, to avoid the sin of idolatry or *shirk*. For IS, the sin of *shirk* was manifest in the very presence of ancient, pre-Islamic relics. Critics dismissed this but this leads us to a central point. On the one hand, the destruction of heritage sites by IS in Palmyra, Mosul and elsewhere was indeed unprecedented. The sites had been preserved for centuries. But from a different perspective, there was little new here. The meanings of the doctrinal concept of *shirk* have been deliberated and debated by rival schools, sects and trends across the history of Islamic thought. It is to this that we now turn.

Outline of topic

The Qur'an is replete with verses declaring the oneness of God and commanding the worship of God alone. This is neatly expressed in the phrase known as the *shahāda* or Muslim declaration of faith, that 'there is no god but God' (*lā ilāha illā 'llāh*). Central to this emphasis upon one God is a concomitant stress in the Qur'an on God's unity, His dissimilarity from all creation and an insistence that God alone is the source of all that there is. The famous 'throne verse' (*āyat al-kursī*) of the Qur'an 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 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 encompass any of His knowledge 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. (Q 2:255)

The Qur'anic conception of monotheism was to be expressed in later Islamic thought in the term *tawḥīd*, deriving from the Arabic root *w-ḥ-d*, with connotations of one or oneness. Yet one of the main ways the Qur'an expresses the oneness of God and calls for the worship of God alone is by condemning its opposite. Numerous verses in the Qur'an warn against committing what it calls *shirk*. Derived from the root *sh-r-k*, this term denotes a sense of sharing, partnering or being an associate of something.⁷ In a theological context, *shirk* means to 'associate' something with God. The Qur'an stresses *shirk* as the one sin that an all-Merciful God does not forgive;

⁵ Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yacoubi, *Refuting ISIS: Destroying its religious foundation and proving that it has strayed from the religion and that fighting it is an obligation*, 2nd edition (Hendon, VA: Sacred Knowledge, 2015), 13-4. Also Muḥammad, al-Ya'qūbi. *Inqādh al-Umma: Fatāwa muḥaḥḥala fī ithbāt anna dā'ish khawārij wa anna qitālahum wājibun* (Hendon, VA: Sacred Knowledge, 2015), 75-6.

⁶ As noted by Finbar Barry Flood. 'Idol Breaking as Image Making in the Islamic State', *Religion and Society* 7:1 (2016), 116-125. Omur Harmanshah. 'ISIS, Heritage, and the spectacles of destruction in the global media', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78:3 (2015); 170-77.

⁷ Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863-93), 4/1541.

God does not forgive that anything is associated with Him (*yushraka bihi*); anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who associates with God has fabricated a tremendous sin. (Q 4:48, 116).

If anyone associates with God (*man yushrik bi-llāh*), God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. (Q 5:72)

Often translated as idolatry or polytheism, this thesis translates *shirk* as ‘association’ with God. It is to associate another being or object with a sense of divinity, worship and honour that is due to God alone, in effect placing other than God on the level of divinity. The medieval grammarian Ibn Manẓūr (d. 1312) expounds this meaning of *shirk* in the Qur’an;

Shirk is to give an association (*sharīk*) to God in his dominion (*mulk*), for God is Exalted above that...It is to give Him an associate in His Lordship (*rubūbiyyatihi*), for God is Exalted above any associates (*shurakā’*) and equals (*andād*)... ‘Do not associate with God’ (*lā tushrik bi-llāh*) means do not equate God with anything...whoever equates anything with God from his creation is an unbeliever (*kāfir*) and *mushrik*.⁸

The doctrinal concept of *shirk* thus replaces divine oneness and unity with plurality. It places the created and contingent on the level of the Creator. *Shirk* grants a partner or an ‘associate’ to a God whom, the Qur’an insists, is unique. “There is nothing like Him” (Q 42:11).

‘Association’ is a chosen translation of *shirk*, then, but this thesis shows the very idea of ‘associating’ with God can be conceived in different ways. It explores a history of interpretation of *shirk* in the Qur’an and later Islamic tradition. But it is worth noting, briefly, that the central importance of *shirk* has never been questioned. *Shirk* is foundational to Islamic thought. All Muslim scholars, schools and sects have echoed the Qur’an to stress the unique sin of *shirk*. The rise of numerous theological schools in the eighth and ninth centuries, from the Khārijite, Murji’a and Mu’tazilī schools, did not preclude a common condemnation of *shirk*. As Toshiko Izutsu writes:

It is thus clear that, from the very beginning, *shirk* was regarded by common consent not only as a ‘big’ sin, but the ‘biggest (*akbar*) of all big sins. And this has never been questioned in the history of (Muslim) theology. But this was also almost the only point of perfect agreement among the Muslim thinkers. Beyond this point, everybody took the way he liked, and opinion was divided.⁹

The traditionalist and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d.1348) places *shirk* at the top of his list of seventy major sins (*al-kabā’ir*), above murder, theft and adultery.¹⁰ Yet equally, the exact meaning or definition of *shirk* is deliberated and debated across the history of Islamic thought. Islamic intellectual history is witness to rival Muslim schools and sects accusing the other of *shirk* in debates over what constitutes normative belief and practice. For instance, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) records the Khārijites accusing the Caliph ‘Alī of *shirk* due to his decision to appoint arbitrators in the conflict with Mu‘āwiya, viewing

⁸ Muḥammad ibn Mukarram, Ibn Manẓūr. *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 15 volumes (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣādir, 1300/1883), 2/2249.

⁹ Toshiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology; a Semantic Analysis of Iman and Islam* (Tokyo; The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965), 37.

¹⁰ Imam Shams al-Din, al-Dhahabi. *The Major Sins*, trans. Aisha Bewley (London: Dar al-Tawqa, 2012), 5-8.

this as granting to men a decision belonging to God.¹¹ The Mu‘tazilī sect were known for an insistence upon the created nature of the Qur’an. In essence a dispute over the nature of God, Mu‘tazilī scholars accused rivals of *shirk* for the refusal to affirm the Qur’an is created. This, in their view, placed God on the level of what He revealed.¹² The Māturīdī theologian al-Taftazānī (d. 1390) criticises the Mu‘tazilī position on free will, which posited humans as creators of their acts and thus, for critics, as rivals of the creative power of God. But al-Taftazānī also warns against the excessive use of *shirk* as an intra-Muslim accusation. In so doing he reveals the Māturīdī-Ash‘arī position on *shirk*:

He who asserts that man creates his own acts should not be immediately labelled as a *mushrik*, for *shirk*, in our view, is to posit an associate (*sharik*) of God in His essence (*bi-dhātihī*)...or in the sense of deserving worship, as in the case of the idol worshippers. It must be observed that the Mu‘tazilī’s in no way do such a thing.¹³

On the question of the divine attributes, the traditionalist Ibn Khuzayma (d. 923) argues for a literal interpretation of references to God’s hand, face and throne in the Qur’an in his *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*.¹⁴ The Ash‘arī theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209), arguing for an allegorical reading, dismissively calls this work the *Kitāb al-Shirk*.¹⁵ In Sufi tradition, we see a range of approaches to *shirk* as Sufi thinkers came to conceive of ‘association’ in various ways. Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) cites the case of Samnūn al-Muḥibb struggling to include the name of the Prophet alongside God in the *shahāda*.¹⁶ The idea that *shirk* denotes anything that detracts the believer from God became a trope in Sufi literature.¹⁷ These few examples suffice to show that while *shirk* is central to Islamic thought, it is equally contested. While all Muslim schools and sects condemn *shirk*, they have understood what it means to ‘associate’ with God in diverse ways.

An overview of sources

One might expect to find a rich body of scholarship exploring these rival conceptions of *shirk* in Islamic intellectual history. But this is not the case. This absence is notable in light of similar studies devoted to other important doctrinal concepts. Izutsu’s analysis of *īmān* and *iḥsān* in early Islamic theology is a case in point.¹⁸ Joseph Norment Bell offers a valuable study of the place and function of love (*maḥabba*)

¹¹ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, al-Ṭabarī. *Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, 15 volumes (Leiden: 1879-1901), 1/3363. Also G.R. Hawting. ‘The significance of the slogan *lā ḥukm illā lillāh...*’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978); 453-63.

¹² Letters attributed to the Mu‘tazilī Caliph al-Ma‘mūn (d.833) state; “their doctrines are pure *kufr* and *shirk* in the eyes of the commander of the Faithful”. See. Al-Ṭabarī. *Tārīkh*, 3/1112-32. C.f Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: from Polemic to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 81 and 80, n.41.

¹³ Sa‘d al-Dīn, al-Taftazānī., *Al-‘Aqā‘id al-Nasifiyya*. 2nd edition (Cairo, 1939), 343. C.f, Izutsu, *Concept of Belief*, 24. For the charge that Mu‘tazilī scholars are *mushrikūn* in Māturīdī texts; Maḥmūd ibn Zayd al-lāmishī. *Kitāb al-tamhīd li qawā‘id al-tawhīd*, ed. A. al-Turkī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1995), 98. Also Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 102 and 198, n.41.

¹⁴ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Ishāq, Ibn Khuzayma. *Kitāb al-Tawhīd wa Ithbāt Şifāt al-Rabb ‘Azza wa Jalla*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Ibrāhīm al-Shahwān (Riyādh: Dār al-Rushd, 1408/1988).

¹⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn, al-Rāzī. *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-Mushtahar bi al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa Mafātīh al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1414/1993), 27/151.

¹⁶ Ignaz Goldziher. ‘Le culte des saints chez les Musulmans’, *Revue de l’histoire des Religions* 2 (1880), 262-3.

¹⁷ Annemarie Schimmel. ‘The Sufi’s and the Shahāda’, in R.G. Hovanissian and Speros Veronis Jr, ed. *Islam’s Understanding of Itself* (Malibu, 1983), 103-25.

¹⁸ Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief*.

in Ḥanbalī thought.¹⁹ Recent years have witnessed a diachronic study of Muslim perspectives on *takfīr* or excommunication.²⁰ To date, however, there is no similar study of *shirk*. This thesis seeks to redress this lacuna and contributes an in-depth scholarly treatment on the topic.

Where we do encounter *shirk*, it is usually on the margins and referenced only in relation to a primary focus of study. Examples here include works of Muslim-Christian relations, which note the traditional Muslim critique of the Trinity and Incarnation, or intellectual biographies of Muslim scholars. There are exceptions, of course, yet these often address *shirk* from distinct angles. The historical-revisionist scholarship of Gerald Hawting (b. 1942) and Patricia Crone (d. 2015) reinterprets the Qur'anic narrative of *shirk* and the *mushrikūn* in the course of their questioning of the historical origins of Islam.²¹ In a short article, Elisabeth Sirriyeh briefly sketches interpretations of *shirk* across a sampling of modern Muslim writers, including 'Alī Sharī'atī, Abul 'Alā Mawdūdī and Muḥammad Kamāl Ḥussein. Sirriyeh's article usefully reveals a rich diversity of interpretation – a key aim of this study – but is limited by a lack of depth and breadth.²² Turning to Arabic language scholarship, we find studies of *shirk* clearly invested in an ideological or sectarian standpoint, usually undisclosed. The Saudi scholar Sulṭān al-'Umairī explores the legal issue of ignorance and culpability for *shirk* in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), though his conception of *shirk* throughout is clearly rooted in his particular school of thought.²³ We see the same in studies of the meaning of *shirk* in Shī'ī tradition.²⁴ In a curious twist, a recent sustained engagement with *shirk* serves only to underline the lack of scholarly interest in the topic. Shabbir Akthar suggests the idea of 'associating' with God no longer makes sense in a secular and irreligious world which, he writes, increasingly doubts or denies the very existence of God:

A necessary condition for committing idolatry is belief – whether firm, intermittent or casual – in the existence of the only God, a condition unfulfilled for many today...Our problem is that modern godless humanity is not temperamentally pagan; modern moderns do not believe in any supernatural being. The profundity of modern doubt forces believers to demonstrate even the coherence of the concept of a (supreme) supernatural being. There are no gods, angels or demons and there never could be such beings. Modern disbelievers are not *mushrikūn* since the presupposition that one made that a viable charge is now unavailable...the accusation of *shirk* is incoherent...How do we today make the gods one – when there are no gods?²⁵

This thesis, even if accepted, pertains only to a non-Muslim context. Akthar overlooks the relevance of *shirk* within Islamic thought and Muslim discourses. Here, it is hard to see how *shirk* could ever lose

¹⁹ Joseph N Bell, *Love Theory in Later Ḥanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

²⁰ Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke, eds. *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfīr* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015).

²¹ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry, passim*. Patricia Crone. 'The Qur'anic Mushrikūn and the Resurrection: Part 1', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75:3 (2012); 445-472. We explore much of this scholarship in Chapter One; 'Reflections on *shirk* in the Qur'an'.

²² Elisabeth Sirriyeh. 'Modern Muslim Interpretations of Shirk', *Religion* 20:2 (1990); 139-59.

²³ Sulṭān Al-'Umairī, *Ishkāliyyat al-'idhār bi-al-jahāl fī al-baḥṭh al-'aqdī; al-itijāhāt, al-buniyya al-istidlāliyya, al-uṣūl al-manhajīyya* (Beirut; Lebanon, Namaa Centre for Research and Studies, 2016). To understand the author's particular conception of *shirk*, which he takes uncritically to refer to 'Islam' as a whole, see Chapter Four.

²⁴ See Allāma Shaykh Ja'far al-Subḥānī, *Al-tawḥīd wa al-shirk fī al-Qur'ān al-karīm* (Beirut: Munazamat al-Awqāf wa al-Amūr al-Khayriyya, 1992).

²⁵ Shabbir Akthar, *The Qur'an and the Secular Mind; a philosophy of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), 258-64.

importance. As a foundational concept of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition, and with the reality of intra-Muslim sectarian and doctrinal diversity, it is not feasible to argue for replacing *shirk* with a new construct such as 'substitutionism' (*istibdāl*), as he suggests.²⁶ The destruction of heritage sites across the Muslim world, as noted earlier, suggest that debates over the nature of *shirk*, far from irrelevant, have rather become central to Muslim and non-Muslim discourse on Islam in the modern age.

Scope, method and outline of thesis

The concept of *shirk* is integral to Islam, then, but we await a sustained analysis of what *shirk* means to Islamic thought and how it has been addressed by different Muslim thinkers. This thesis examines the roots of the concept of *shirk* in the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet before exploring how a range of thinkers, from the post-classical to modern periods, have understood what it means to 'associate' with God. More specifically, this thesis examines how the doctrinal idea of *shirk* or 'association' with God has implications for the social and political sphere. For this reason, it largely avoids the speculative theological and philosophical discourses on the nature of divine oneness and unity that defined the formative period of Islamic thought, roughly the ninth to the twelfth centuries, what is called the early 'flowering of Muslim theology.'²⁷ Theological debates on the divine essence and attributes, free-will or pre-determinism and the nature of Qur'an are not the concern of this thesis. Rather, this thesis explores the meaning of *shirk* at the intersection of scripture, theology and socio-political reform. It examines how Muslim thinkers have engaged *shirk* not just as a doctrinal or theological category but, from this, as a socio-political phenomenon defining the societies of their time. The four figures chosen for analysis are Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Muḥammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb (d. 1792), Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966). Each chapter is rooted in a close reading of their works, tied to a study of their historical and intellectual contexts, methodologies, use of scripture and approach to the Islamic tradition and the Muslim community of their age. In so doing, this thesis reveals a rich intra-Islamic debate over the nature and meaning of *shirk*. It shows that while the Qur'anic command to avoid *shirk* is a major theme, the very meaning of 'association' is frequently reinterpreted by different Muslim thinkers, each in line with their particular contexts. Exploring Muslim conceptions of *shirk*, then, even within this narrow sampling of figures, opens this rich and hitherto under-explored area of enquiry.

There are several reasons for choosing these figures. Each thinker examined in this thesis, I argue, writes in a time of perceived intellectual, social and political crisis. Each also possesses an activist ethic that moves beyond intellectual criticism and takes active, concerted measures to reshape and reform the Muslim community of their day. Consider Ibn Taymiyya as an example. Surveying a career that involved participation in military battles against the Mongols, the close association of rulers and regular

²⁶ Akthar, *The Qur'an*, 263-4.

²⁷ See Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

periods in prison, Ovamir Anjum speaks of the “activist scholarship” of Ibn Taymiyya and gives the following overview:

If one browses through the biographies of medieval scholars, the image of the typical scholar is that of a schoolman, a jurist, a theologian, a conservative figure who served the authorities as a civil servant or fled in pious evasion. The typical member of the civilian elite to which the ulema belonged was not an activist, warrior or a popular reformer. Ibn Taymiyya was different.²⁸

Yet a similar assessment applies to all of the figures explored in this thesis. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is famous for his pact with the ruler Muḥammad ibn Su’ūd which, shortly after his death, united the Arabian Peninsula and lay the basis for the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In a different vein, Muḥammad ‘Abduh was equally engaged with reshaping Egyptian society after the colonial domination of Muslim lands by Western powers. ‘Abduh harnessed the new medium of print and was a journalist, editor and scholar with a focus on educational reform, particularly at al-Azhar, eventually becoming Chief Muftī of Egypt in 1899. Decades later, Sayyid Quṭb was the leading ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the mid-twentieth century. Initially close to the Egyptian regime, Quṭb was later arrested but continued, via his prison writings, to call for revolution and his vision of an Islamic state. In his own time and beyond, Quṭb’s ideas have inspired later movements of radical Islam. In a sense, then, none of these figures were just scholars. Each can also be seen as actively engaging the socio-political sphere to reshape the Muslim societies of their time.

There is perhaps a deeper thread linking these figures. They are often described as representative of the *salafī* trend of Islamic thought. Exploring conceptions of *shirk* under the banner of ‘*salafī* Islam’, then, could provide another framework for this study. But this thesis does not insist upon the category. The diversity of this group in itself points to the elasticity, even ambiguity, of use of the *salafī* label in much of modern scholarship. As Ahmad Khan writes:

To talk about the Salafī reform movement in general is to cast an irresponsibly wide net. The term Salafiyya has, historically, invoked such a wide spectrum of ideological strands, often in direct contradistinction to one another, that one’s identification of a Salafī reform movement has to be qualified, if not isolated, to its particular regional or historical context.²⁹

The question of what *salafī* means is in fact far from clear.³⁰ We find fierce debates in scholarship over whether Muḥammad ‘Abduh is a *salafī* or not, for example, rooted in different definitions of the term.³¹

²⁸ Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought; The Taymiyyan Moment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 186.

²⁹ Ahmad Khan. ‘Islamic Tradition in an Age of Print; Editing, Printing and Publishing the Classical Heritage’, in Elisabeth Kendall and Ahmad Khan, ed. *Reclaiming Islamic Tradition; Modern Interpretations of the Classical Heritage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 56.

³⁰ William A. Graham claims all Muslims can in a sense be considered *salafī*; ‘Traditionalism in Islam: an essay in interpretation’ *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23:3 (1993), 500. (“Indeed, since the Salaf themselves are the original codifiers and transmitters (and hence guarantors) of the Qur’anic text and the reports concerning Muhammad’s word and practice, any traditionalist vision among Muslims can legitimately be called Salafī – quite apart from the specific historical groups that have adopted the name for themselves.”)

³¹ For the claim ‘Abduh cannot be seen as a *salafī* based on the grounds that such a term never emerges in his works and is a later projection; Henri Lauziere. ‘The Construction of Salafiyya; reconsidering Salafism from the perspective of conceptual history’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42:3 (2010), 374. Against this; Frank Griffel. ‘What do we mean by ‘salafī’? Connecting Muhammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nur party in Islam’s contemporary intellectual history’, *Die Welt des*

The same problem presents itself when considering terms like ‘renewal’ (*tajdīd*) and ‘reform’ (*iṣlāḥ*). It is almost *de rigueur* in scholarship to describe our chosen figures as ‘reformers’ or ‘renewers’ of Islam.³² But again, this raises the same problem of definition and meaning. The label ‘reformer’ could no less apply to a range of very different figures, from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240), Shah Waliullāh (d. 1762) to ‘Abdul Qādir al-Jazā’irī (d. 1883). In short, the term appears equally broad and elastic.

Lastly, these thinkers are chosen in light of their continuing, contemporary relevance. The influence of each extends well beyond their own time and context, up to the present day. Familiar to all students and scholars of Islamic studies, the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Abduh and Quṭb continue to receive attention and are among a small sampling of Muslim figures known equally to both popular laity and scholarship. The visions of *shirk* expressed by these thinkers, then, reflect a small but significant trend of the Islamic tradition.

Each of the chapters of this thesis explores a specific engagement with *shirk*. The focus of this study is intra-Muslim deliberations on the perceived presence of *shirk* in different Muslim contexts. The use of *shirk* in relation to non-Islamic traditions lies beyond the scope of this study. Where relevant, this study addresses other areas of Islamic theology that overlap with the relevant reflection on *shirk*. This includes the interplay of *shirk* and unbelief (*kufr*) and the classic Ḥanbalī distinction between the lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and divinity (*ulūhiyya*) of God, particularly in the work of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb; the interpretation of the divine attributes in the Qur’an, as in the case of Ibn Taymiyya; also, the question of the role of reason (*al-‘aql*) in matters of faith, as in ‘Abduh. These auxiliary issues further illustrate each thinker’s engagement with *shirk*. I largely avoid the distinction found in the hadith corpus between lesser and greater *shirk* (*shirk al-akbar*, *shirk al-asghar*). For our purposes, this fails to offer any meaningful additional insight to our study. It may be added that the constraints of devoting only one chapter to each thinker make it not possible to cover all aspects of their life and thought, nor all relevant secondary literature. Only that which relates to and deepens our understanding of the place of *shirk* in their works is included. Further material is signposted in footnotes.

The choice of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Abduh and Quṭb makes no attempt to be inclusive of all major schools or sects. Nor does a narrow focus on four Sunni thinkers from the Arab Middle

Islams 55:2 (2015); 186-220. Responding to Griffel; Henri Lauziere. ‘Rejoinder: What we mean versus what they meant by ‘salafi’: a reply to Frank Griffel’, *Die Welt des Islams* 56:1 (2016); 89-96. A response: Frank Griffel. ‘Rejoinder: What is the Task of the Intellectual (contemporary) historian? – A response to Henri Lauziere’s “Reply”’, *Die Welt des Islams* 56:2 (2016); 249-55.

³² See the following edited volumes that include Quṭb and ‘Abduh in their accounts of modern ‘revivers’ of Islam. Ali Rahnama, ed. *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (Chicago: Zed Books, 2005). John L. Eposito, ed. *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York; Oxford University Press, 1983). For a work describing Ibn Taymiyya and ‘Abdul Wahhāb as renewers (*mujaddidūn*) of Islam, see ‘Abd al-Mut’āl al-Sa’īdī. *Al-Mujaddidūn fī al-Islām min al-qarn al-awwal ila al-qarn al-rāb’i ‘ashar* (Cairo: Maktabah al-Adab, 1894 H).

East claim these as representatives of ‘mainstream’ or ‘orthodox’ Islam.³³ Indeed each of these thinkers was divisive and controversial in their time. Each chapter is rooted in a close reading of each thinker, but alludes to this criticism and controversy. Opponents of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb receive the greatest attention for the simple reason that his condemnation of the Muslim community is the most severe, and his movement the most successful, of all the figures examined. Exploring the nature of his early opposition sheds valuable light on the contested origins of an influential trend of contemporary Islam. That each of these thinkers created controversy should not surprise us. We recall that the focus of this study is intra-Islamic deliberations on *shirk*, the use of the concept of *shirk* as a tool for internal criticism within the Muslim community. Gerald Hawting’s comments on the charge of idolatry as a tool for intra-confessional polemic neatly applies here;

The basic meaning of idolatry has been extended to cover diverse beliefs and practices viewed as erroneous... (but) those who have been accused of idolatry because of their acceptance of such practices and views would deny that they were idolaters and, from the viewpoint of an observer not personally involved in the polemic, may be justified in offering such a denial. What looks like idolatry to one party seems like perfectly good monotheism to the other.³⁴

We see this in what follows. Both the figures surveyed in this thesis and their opponents are Muslims. Both sides employ Muslim scripture and wider tradition to support their case. This points to the fraught and contested nature of any claim to orthodox or normative Islam. But it also reveals something of the nature of Islamic tradition itself. The moral philosopher Alasdair McIntyre (b. 1929) suggests we think of tradition not as static, fixed and unchanging, but rather as something dynamic and fluid, defined by internal criticism and debate within an otherwise shared set of core beliefs and premises.³⁵ Applying McIntyre’s reading to the Islamic tradition, Muhammad Qasim Zaman writes:

Among those inhabiting a tradition, there are defenders of particular norms just as there are critics of different degrees of intensity... Nor are we to suppose that a tradition’s internal critics are critical of all aspects of that tradition; they would not be *internal* critics if that were the case, for their goal typically is to defend certain aspects of that tradition by critiquing others. Understandably, therefore, the boundaries between internal critics and defenders of a tradition... are not always clearly discernible.³⁶

Talal Asad’s notion of Islam as “discursive tradition” is an increasingly popular way of conceiving the rich internal diversity that characterises Islamic thought.³⁷ Contestation, then, is central to the life of a tradition. The focus of this thesis is on four internal critics within the Islamic tradition. We see in each chapter how each figure roots himself in a reading of the authoritative sources of the Qur’an, the hadith and Islamic tradition, deferring to aspects of the tradition while critiquing others and, above all, sharply

³³ Several scholars reject the idea of orthodoxy in Islam. See William Montgomery-Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 1973), 5-6. Ignaz Goldziher and George Makdisi. ‘Hanbalite Islam’, in M. Swarz, ed. and trans. *Studies on Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 251. Against this view, see Sherman Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Taḥrīq* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30-32.

³⁴ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 67.

³⁵ Alasdair McIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

³⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a radical age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34-5. See also 138-9. (Italics in original text).

³⁷ See Ovais Anjum. ‘Islam as a Discursive Tradition; Talal Asad and his Interlocutors’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27:3 (2002); 656-92.

condemning many of the beliefs and practices that are said to constitute *shirk* and to define the Muslim societies of their day.

Outline of chapters

This study traces the evolution of an idea. It outlines the scriptural roots of the concept of *shirk* before addressing four distinct approaches to *shirk* from different periods and scholars of Islamic thought. Each chapter combines a close reading of primary sources, involving untranslated and under-examined materials, with an extensive engagement of secondary literature. Chapter One explores reflections on *shirk* in the Qur'an. Even here, we find a rich area of enquiry. While the condemnation of *shirk* is a dominant refrain, the Qur'an has multiple ways of speaking of *shirk* and gives no single or fixed image of what it means to 'associate' with God. Drawing on three prophetic narratives, Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad, this chapter examines three distinct reflections on *shirk* to illustrate the many and allusive ways that the Qur'an conveys a sense of 'association.'

Chapter Two overviews the extra-Qur'anic sources that arise from the eighth century and which purport to describe the life of the Prophet and early Muslim community at the advent of Islam. This includes hadith collections, works on the life of the Prophet (*sīra*) and the histories of pre and early Islam, particularly the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (Book of Idols) of Ḥishām Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819). A very different image emerges from these sources to that found in the Qur'an. The Qur'an's complex and allusive account of the nature of *shirk* is replaced with a clear image of idolatry in pre-Islamic Mecca. *Shirk* at the time of the Prophet is conflated with idol worship, with opponents known as the *mushrikūn* depicted as idolaters in a literal sense. This, in turn, reveals how historians like Ibn al-Kalbī did not conceive of *shirk* as just a metaphysical or doctrinal error. It had tangible manifestations in the social sphere. This chapter explores the reports of idol destruction said to have accompanied the spread of Islam. Even at the time of the Prophet, then, *shirk* had a practical and social dimension, manifest in the worship of idols.

In later centuries the pre-Islamic idols were no longer extant. The centuries after the time of the Prophet witnessed the flowering of a rich intellectual tradition, with disciplines of jurisprudence, theology, mysticism, philosophy, exegesis and more. The key development for our purposes is that *shirk* no longer refers exclusively to those outside the fold of Islam, but equally to rival schools, sects and practices within it. Chapter Three reveals how the famous Ḥanbalī theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) engages *shirk* in two distinct but related ways: firstly, in responding to Ash'arī allegorical readings of the divine attributes, particularly on the question of the love (*maḥabba*) of God, and secondly, in condemning the popular cult of Muslim saints, a defining feature of *Mamlūk*-era piety.

Chapter Four moves to the eighteenth-century Arabian Peninsula. This chapter analyses the expansive reading of *shirk* put forth by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb, a reading that encompasses effectively all aspects of popular Muslim belief and practice in the Arabia of his time. Reviving some of the earliest

debates of Muslim theology, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb views acts (*al-a’ māl*) as integral to faith and equates *shirk* with unbelief (*kufir*). In so doing, he declares mass excommunication (*takfir*) of the Muslim community.

It is common to read of the deep impact of Western colonialism upon the Muslim world, responses to which are said to constitute ‘modern’ Islamic thought. On this basis scholars often presume a rupture between eighteenth and nineteenth-century Islamic thinkers and movements that fall on either side:

Any idea of continuity between the 18th century movements and their late 19th century counterparts can only ignore the impact of modernity and colonialism. The impact of the West as a political and intellectual force was hardly present in those earlier movements...and the intellectual responses of the 18th century movements were entirely developed from indigenous concepts of *tajdid* (renewal). Thus, the 19th century reformist trends can be set apart from the 18th century revivalist movements.³⁸

Chapter Five analyses the works of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and nuances this reading. ‘Abduh responds to the challenges of his colonial milieu but still heavily engages the classical Islamic heritage. Emphasising the rational character of Islam, ‘Abduh closely ties the concept of *shirk* to notions of irrationality and superstition in religion. Through a complex engagement with Ash‘arī theological concepts, ‘Abduh interprets *shirk* to mean a rejection of the modern science and technology that emerges from the West.

Chapter Six addresses the nature of *shirk* in the prison writings of Sayyid Quṭb. Writing at the height of the Cold War, Quṭb insists that sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) is an attribute of God and argues that no Muslim can acknowledge any political or legal authority outside the *sharī‘a*. From this, Quṭb subsumes a range of Western ideologies, from capitalism to communism to nationalism, under the rubric of *shirk*. These systems usurp the divine attribute of sovereignty and become, for Quṭb, the ‘idols’ of his age.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to illustrate and emphasise what is the most salient feature of *shirk*. The idea of *shirk* is integral to the Qur’an and Islamic tradition. It is the antithesis of the monotheistic message of Islam. But what does it mean to ‘associate’ with God? As central a concept as *shirk* is to Islam, this thesis reveals how no single image or understanding claims a monopoly over its definition. From Ibn Taymiyya to Quṭb, the concept of *shirk* has been reinterpreted and repackaged by different thinkers, each in line with their particular contexts. And it is even possible to trace this back to the origins of the concept in the Qur’an itself, a close reading of which reveals no fixed image of *shirk* and multiple ways of expressing the nature of ‘association’ with God. Exploring the history of Muslim interpretations of *shirk*, then, and thus revealing the elasticity and dynamism of the idea itself, is the central aim of this study. In what follows, there emerges no single image or understanding of what it means to ‘associate’ with God.

The idea of *shirk* is integral to Islam, lastly, for what it reveals of its opposite. As noted earlier, the Qur’anic account of *shirk* is one of the ways in which it expresses the core doctrine of the oneness of

³⁸ Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourses* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 26-7.

God. This applies across this thesis. The diverse conceptions of *shirk* surveyed in this thesis reflect, in turn, different conceptions of *tawhīd*. For Ibn Taymiyya, who posits love of God (*al-maḥabba*) as the essence of *tawhīd*, the nature of *shirk* becomes the love of something alongside or in place of God, what Ibn Taymiyya terms *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*. Muḥammad 'Abduh's insistence upon the rationality of Islam leads him to view *shirk* as essentially irrational and superstitious. Sayyid Quṭb's reading of *tawhīd*, wherein the oneness of God excludes all secular authority, leads him to denounce all secular systems and ideologies as *shirk*. It will be shown throughout this thesis how notions of *shirk* and *tawhīd* shape and are shaped by the other. In this light they do not appear as irreconcilable opposites, but rather closely connected doctrines that give meaning and definition to the other. Exploring the idea of idolatry in Jewish theology, the comments of Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit are pertinent here:

Our book...is principally a conceptual analysis of idolatry as it is seen by its opponents...It is an attempt to understand a phenomenon through the way it defines the "enemy". The assumption is that we can find the answer to the question of what the monotheists consider the proper worship of the proper God by seeing how they define the alien realm.³⁹

This thesis explores Muslim interpretations of *shirk*, then, but it could equally be framed as a study into different conceptions of *tawhīd*. It is a way of exploring the meanings of *tawhīd* in Islamic thought by way of its opposite. However we choose to frame or address the topic, this thesis argues that a deeper appreciation of the diversity of approaches to *shirk* in Islamic thought is required and overdue.

³⁹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit. *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 8.

Chapter I: Reflections on *shirk* in the Qur'an

So follow what has been revealed to you from your Lord – that there is no god but Him. And turn away from the *mushrikūn*. (Q 6:106)

There is no single term in the Qur'an that expresses the core Islamic doctrine of monotheism. The Qur'an expresses the meaning of 'there is no god but God' in a variety of ways for this underpins every other theme of the Qur'an. The Arabic term for God, *Allāh*, a contraction of *al-ilāh* (the god), is found almost three thousand times, alongside other terms such as Lord (*rabb*). Thirty times the Qur'an repeats the phrase "there is no god but Him" (*lā ilāha illā huwa*). The declaration of Muslim faith known as the *shahāda*, that 'there is no god but God' (*lā ilāha illā 'llāh*), is taken from two verses but variations of this are repeated throughout:

God! There is no god but Him. The Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. (Q 3:2)

Your true god is One God, there is no god but Him, whose knowledge embraces everything. (Q 20:98)

Know that there is no god but God, and ask forgiveness for your sins and for believing men and women. God knows whenever any of you move, and whenever any of you stay still. (Q 47:19)

This insistence upon the oneness and uniqueness of God is more than a numerical claim. The Qur'an ascribes a range of attributes or what are called the "most beautiful names" (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā'*) to God. These include the self-sufficient (*al-ghanī*), powerful (*al-qadīr*), glorious (*al-majīd*), eternal (*al-qayyūm*), most high (*al-'alā*) and creator (*al-khāliq*), among others.⁴⁰ Each of these names enriches our understanding of the oneness and uniqueness of God. On the name of 'creator', for example, the Qur'an repeatedly insists that God alone is the creator of everything and the ultimate source of all that there is:

People, remember God's grace towards you. Is there a creator other than God to give you sustenance from the heavens and the earth? There is no god but Him. How can you be so deluded? (Q 35:3)

This is God, your Lord, there is no god but Him, the creator of all things, so worship Him... (Q 6:102)

God has control of the heavens and the earth; He creates whatever He Wills. (Q 42:49)

Yet the term that came to define what belief in oneness meant for Muslims is not found in the Qur'an. The term *tawḥīd* emerges in later tradition to express the particular Qur'anic and Islamic understanding of monotheism. A Form II intensive noun derived from the trilateral root *w-ḥ-d*, with connotations of one or oneness, several hadith reports suggest that this term was in fact in use at the time of the Prophet:

Jarīr narrated that the Messenger of God said; 'some people of *tawḥīd* (*ahl al-tawḥīd*) will be punished in the Fire until they are coals. Then the Mercy (of God) will reach them, they will be taken out and tossed at the doors of paradise...then they will enter paradise.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For self-sufficient; Q 2:263; powerful, Q 2:20; glorious, Q 85:15; eternal, Q 2:255; most high, Q 87:1; creator; Q 13:16; 36:81; 3:47; 5:17; 24:45; 28:68; 30:54; 39:4; 42:49.

⁴¹ Muḥammad ibn 'Isā, al-Tirmidhī. *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ wa huwa Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, ed. Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh ibn al-'Arabī (Al-Azhar, Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Miṣriyya, 1350-53/1931-34), 2/2597.

Al-Bukhārī (d. 870) has a chapter on *tawhīd* (*bāb al-tawhīd*) in his influential hadith collection. This covers all traditions that speak of the nature of God and reflects how the term had come to capture the idea of monotheism in Islam as early as the ninth century.⁴² Scholars from rival schools, sects and trends of Islamic thought have written volumes exploring the essential meanings of *tawhīd*. The medieval Sufi and jurist Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) opens his treatise ‘The Principles of the Creed’ (*Qawā’id al-‘Aqā’id*) with the following definition of *tawhīd*:

God is one in his essence without partner (*sharīk*), unique without likeness, absolute without opposite, singular without equal. He is eternal without a predecessor, timeless without beginning, ever-being without end, everlasting without termination, all-sustaining without interruption, constant without waning. He is, was and ever will be endowed with qualities of majesty (*al-jalāl*), and the interval of time and passing of lifespans with never bring Him to an end. Rather, ‘He is the First, the Last, the Outward, the Inward, He is of all things Knowing’ (Q 57:3)⁴³

Tawhīd has both an elusive and pervasive quality. While the term is absent, the idea itself is the very essence of the Qur’an. This is perhaps what Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) refers to when he cryptically describes *tawhīd* as “the secret of the Qur’an.” (*sirr al-Qur’ān*)⁴⁴

The chapter most often associated with the doctrine of *tawhīd* in the Qur’an is chapter 112. A favourite of exegetes and widely memorised and recited in Muslim piety, the chapter commonly known as *sūrat al-ikhhlāṣ* contains short, eloquent descriptions of the nature of God:

Say, ‘He is God the One (*aḥad*).

God the eternal, (*al-ṣamad*).

He begot not nor was He begotten.

And nothing is comparable to Him. (Q 112:1-4)

Exegetes focus on the distinction between *aḥad* and *wāḥid* as terms for ‘one’. In all other verses God is described as *wāḥid*.⁴⁵ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209) suggests *aḥad* and *wāḥid* are synonyms.⁴⁶ Other exegetes like Ibn ‘Ajība (d. 1209) claim *aḥad* conveys internal oneness, the oneness of God’s essence (*dhāt*) and his indivisible nature (*lā yanqasim*), whereas *wāḥid* means oneness in relation to others.⁴⁷ The term *al-ṣamad* occurs only once in the Qur’an. Its lexical meaning denotes something solid or impenetrable, but the enigmatic nature of the term leads to a range of interpretations, mostly variations

⁴² Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans. *Sahih Bukhari: The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Bukhari* (Lahore: 1979-83), 9/285-400.

⁴³ Al-Ghazālī. *Kitāb Qawā’id al-‘Aqā’id/The Principles of the Creed; Book 2 of the Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn: The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. Khalid Williams and Intro. James Pavlin (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016), 4-5. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, hadīth no. 5013.

⁴⁴ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyyah. *Majmū’ al-Fatāwā* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Muḥammad ‘Alī Baydūn : Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2000/1426), 1/269.

⁴⁵ Q 2:163, 12:39, 13:16, 14:48, 38:65, 39:4, 40:16.

⁴⁶ Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar. *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī; al-Mushtashar bi al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa Maḥāṭih al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 2005), 6/161-5.

⁴⁷ Ibn ‘Ajība, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad. *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Majīd*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Alī Baydūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2005), 6/371. For Ibn Manẓūr, *aḥad* denotes negation (‘I did not see anyone (*mā r’aytu aḥad*)’) and *wāḥid* conveys affirmation. See Muḥammad ibn Mukarram, Ibn Manẓūr. *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṣadr, 1300/1883), 4781-2.

on the idea God is ultimate source of all things.⁴⁸ The next verse denies divine progeny. Exegetes see this to reject both notions of sonship and incarnation of Jesus and the pre-Islamic Arab believe in the angels as daughters of God.⁴⁹ The final verse stresses God is not only one but also unique. The oneness of God in the Qur'an is opposed to belief in many gods but, equally, any parallel or likeness between God and creation. The Qur'an insists "there is nothing like Him." (*laysa ka-mithlihi shayy*, 42:11).

It is customary to read the Qur'an as addressed to two particular audiences; the pagan opponents of the Prophet, on the one hand, and 'People of the Book', meaning Jewish and Christian sects, on the other.⁵⁰ The Qur'an's call to monotheism thus emerges from a milieu marked by rival conceptions of the divine, and perhaps the most striking feature of the Qur'an is the extent of interaction with its audience. The Qur'an repeatedly engages its immediate environment and, in many verses, directly addresses groups and individuals that accept or reject its message, pivoting on a binary between believers (*mu'minūn*) and unbelievers (*kāfirūn*). In other verses the audience figure as speakers, with statements ascribed to those around the Prophet starting with the common formulae: "and they say (*wa-qālū*)".⁵¹ Many verses claim to cite questions put to the Prophet, usually by opponents, before enjoining the correct response:

They ask you about the Hour, 'When will it arrive?' Say, 'My Lord alone has knowledge of it.' (Q 7:187)

They ask you about the Spirit. Say, 'The Spirit is part of My Lord's domain. You have only been given a little knowledge.' (Q 17:85)

This gives the Qur'an a sense of dynamism and instantaneity.⁵² But these verses are also highly allusive. While clearly referring to the Prophet and his interlocutors, any explicit names or identities are absent. As Tarif Khalidi explains, the Qur'an's interaction with its immediate milieu is deeply referential and impressionistic.

The *name* "Muhammad" itself is mentioned only four times in the Qur'an...on the other hand, there are hundreds of references to Muhammad described as Messenger/Prophet (*rasul* and *nabiyy*) and hundreds of other allusions to someone unnamed who most probably is Muhammad. Behind this stands another curious feature, namely that there are hardly names of *contemporary* people in the Qur'an....Yes, the Qur'an constantly *alludes* to people ("and those who did this or that" or "he or she who said this or that") but it never names them....The *moral* of the story is foremost, not the story itself with its names and dates and details.⁵³

⁴⁸ For an in-depth study of the range of interpretations; Uri Rubi. 'Al-Samad and the High God: An Interpretation of Sura CXII', *Der Islam* 61 (1984); 200-7. Edward William Lane writes that *samad* means; "the Being that continues for ever, after his creatures have perished...the Creator of everything, of whom nothing is independent, and whose unity everything indicates. See his *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1984), I/1727.

⁴⁹ For verses interpreted as a rejection of Christian doctrines of the sonship and incarnation of Jesus: Q 4:171; 9:30; 19:35, 91-92. For verses condemning the view that God has daughters; Q 6; 100; 16:57; 43:16.

⁵⁰ For the problems of using the term 'pagan'; Michael Frede and Polymnia Athanassiadi, ed. *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 4-5. For an overview of the Islamic historical-traditional account of the origins of the Qur'an, see Fred M. Donner. 'The Historical Context', in J. D. McAuliffe, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23-30.

⁵¹ Q 79:10-12; 25:5-8; 47:24; 43:31.

⁵² Nicolai Sinai and Angelika Neuwirth. 'Introduction', in *idem* and Michael Marx, eds. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 10. ("Even on a superficial reading, the Qur'an is not a systematic, gospel-type codification of the essential message of a religious movement that has already established itself on the historical scene, but rather a live transcript of this very act of entering the scene.")

⁵³ Tarif Khalidi, *Images of Muhammad: Narratives of the Prophet in Islam Across the Centuries* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 24-5. (italics in original)

It is important to stress this aspect of the Qur'an at the outset. The Qur'an appears to assume that its immediate audience are readily aware of the nature and identity of the individuals, objects and practices to which it refers. This allusive quality is also explained, perhaps, by appreciating its oral origins. Often treated as a written literary text, the origins of the Qur'an are said to lie in oral proclamations declared over an extended period and its aural aspect, the rhythmic sounds and beauty of its recitation, has been central to its historical reception and transmission.⁵⁴ Scholars also explain the use of allusion and ambiguity in the Qur'an by pointing to its deeply homiletic and exhortative nature.⁵⁵ This sermon-like quality pervades its discourse. The stories of Qur'anic prophets, for example, have been called "punishment stories", shaped by formulaic features that stress divine judgment and the consequence of rejecting God's prophets.⁵⁶ Addressing the contemporary audience, the Qur'an is replete with threats, warnings, curses, oaths, reprimands and praise. The imminence of the Day of Judgment is a repeated theme.⁵⁷ Striking use of imagery, metaphor and simile is common. The divine authorial voice often interjects these passages with moral or exhortatory comments, called 'clausulae', that stand apart from the main flow of the narrative and remark upon what is reported, usually indicating divine approval or censure or the attitude expected from the Qur'an's audience.⁵⁸

Will you heed anyone other than God? (Q 16:52)

Do they not use their reason? (Q 36:68)

The Qur'an does not speak dispassionately of the oneness of God, then, nor does so in a vacuum. It employs a range of moods, voices and homiletic strategies to insist or argue for its core message of monotheism. This sense of debate and contestation in the Qur'an, of interacting with a diverse audience of those who both accept and deny its message, is clear to any reader. It is also clear in much of what follows in this chapter.

Roots and meaning of *shirk* (*sh-r-k*) in the Qur'an

One of the main ways that the Qur'an expresses the oneness of God and commands the worship of God alone is by condemning its opposite. The Qur'an is replete with commands to avoid what it considers *shirk*. Condemnations of *shirk* are a dominant refrain. Derived from the trilateral root *sh-r-k*, in a basic sense *shirk* means to share, to partner or to be an associate of something.⁵⁹ The origins of the term are unclear although it has been suggested the term entered Arabic through Sabaeen sources from pre-

⁵⁴ See Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985), xiv.

⁵⁵ For the Qur'an as homily see Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2008), 230-258.

⁵⁶ A. Welch. 'Formulaic Features of the punishment stories' in I. J. Boullata, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000); 77-116.

⁵⁷ Q 70:1-14; 81:1-10; 82:1-4; 101:1-5; 88:1-4;

⁵⁸ For 'clausulae', see Angelika Neuwirth. 'Structure and the Emergence of Community', in Andrew Rippin, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 152.

⁵⁹ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 4/1541.

Islamic South Arabia.⁶⁰ In the works of pre-Islamic poetry the root *sh-r-k* was used to convey notions of sharing or associating but in a profane sense, without religious overtones. Pre-Islamic sources record the prophet's uncle Abū Ṭālib criticising the ancestors of a rival family, the 'Abd Shams and Nawfal in these terms:

They gave a share in (*ashrakā fi*) their nobility to those without ancestry.⁶¹

The Qur'an appears to assume the term needs no explanation. It draws on a well-known root from the pre-Islamic Hijāz, then, but reconfigures it. In the Qur'an *shirk* moves from a secular to a doctrinal term and comes to mean partnering or associating other gods, beings or objects with God, in effect placing other than God on the level of divinity. Ibn Manzūr (d. 1311) gives the following definition:

Shirk is to give an association (*sharīk*) to God in his dominion (*mulk*), for God is Exalted above that...It is to give Him an associate in His Lordship (*rubūbiyyatihi*), for God is Exalted above any associates (*shurakā'*) and equals (*andād*)... (the verse) 'Do not associate with God' (in the Qur'an) means do not equate God with anything... whoever equates anything with God from his creation is an unbeliever (*kāfir*) and *mushrik*.⁶²

The Oriental lexicographer Edward William-Lane (d. 1876) defines *shirk* as the "attribution of a partner or partners to God (so that it may be rendered belief in a plurality of Gods)."⁶³ The more recent Qur'an translator, exegete and linguist Muhammad Asad (d. 1992) offers a pithier rendering of *shirk*: "to ascribe divinity to naught but God."⁶⁴ On this basis the Qur'an, which insists upon the oneness and uniqueness of God and the worship of God alone, reserves its strongest condemnation for *shirk*. Across several verses the Qur'an posits *shirk* as the only sin that God does not forgive:

God does not forgive that anything is associated with Him (*yushraka bihi*); anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who associates with God has fabricated a tremendous sin. (Q 4:48, 116).

If anyone associates with God (*man yushrik bi-llāh*), God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. (Q 5:72)

This makes *shirk* a unique concept in the Qur'an. No other concept, even *kufr* (unbelief/ingratitude), is condemned in these terms. Elsewhere the Qur'an explains *shirk* as a 'terrible wrong' (*ẓulm mubīn*, 31:13) and as "inventing lies against God" (*al-iftirā' alā Allāh al-kadhib*).⁶⁵ While the term *shirk* occurs in five verses, the verb 'to associate' (*ashraka*) and its various cognates are found in seventy-one places. The noun 'associate' or 'associates' (*sharīk, shurakā'*) are used in forty verses, while the insistence that God has no associate (*shārik*) is a repeated claim. References to the major group of opponents of the

⁶⁰ For discussions on the non-Arabic, pre-Islamic origins of the root *sh-r-k*, see P.K. Hitti, *The History of the Arabs*, 7th edition (London: MacMillan, 1961), 105., n.5. Chaim Rubin. 'On the Probability of South Arabian Influence on the Arabic Vocabulary', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 127. Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Koran* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 186.

⁶¹ Ibn Hishām, 'Abd al-Malik. *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafa al-Saqqā (Cairo; 1955), I/268. C.f. Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam; from Polemic to History* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1999), 70.

⁶² Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, 2249.

⁶³ Lane, *Arabic-English*, 4/1542.

⁶⁴ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Bristol, UK: The Book Foundation, 2003), 1/131.

⁶⁵ Q 5:73; 10:68-70;

Prophet, known as the ‘associators’ or *mushrikūn*, are also a central theme. At times the condemnation of *shirk* is expressed through striking imagery and simile. The ‘associator’ or *mushrik* is likened to a man falling from the sky without protection:

Devote yourself to God and do not associate with Him, for the person who associates with God (*man yushrik bi-llāh*), is like someone who has been hurled down from the skies and snatched up by the birds and flung to a distance place by the wind. (Q 22:31)

In a sense, the entire Qur’an can be read as a warning against *shirk*. If the oneness and uniqueness of God is the underpinning theme in the Qur’an, that which ties all other themes together, *shirk* rejects this at its root. It posits a plurality in divinity which always challenges the oneness intrinsic to the doctrine of *tawhīd*.

The Qur’an refers to itself as “guidance” (*hudā*) for humankind and insists we can learn the metaphysical truth of the oneness of God in various ways.⁶⁶ Each of these function, in turn, as reflections on the error of *shirk*. The first is through the natural order. Numerous verses point to the signs of the natural world, the very fact of an ordered creation, as one of the foremost ways of realising the truth of God. The nature of God is manifest, it seems, in His creation;

In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alteration of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and the earth; there are signs for all these for people who use their minds. (Q 2:164)⁶⁷

This is buttressed with logical argument; if there were other gods with God, the Qur’an insists, the world would be corrupted.⁶⁸ Such passages reflect a confidence in the Qur’an, even insistence, that reflecting on the signs of nature will inevitably lead to God. But there is a sense from the Qur’an that all of creation already recognises the oneness and unity of God. Several verses describe the sun, moon, stars and other natural phenomena prostrating in submission to God:

Do you not realise that everything in the heavens and earth submits to God: the sun, moon, stars, mountains, trees and animals (*al-dawāb*)? So do many human beings, though for many others torment is due... (Q 22:18)

Shirk, then, reflects the failure to be correctly attuned to this reality. It is rooted in the failure to correctly ‘see’ the natural world. This also means that humankind is unique in this regard: while the rest of creation affirms the oneness of God, humankind alone diverges from this in a tendency to commit *shirk*.

We also learn of the oneness of God through the prophets. Revelation is closely tied to prophecy in the Qur’an. The declaration of Muslim faith ties the oneness of God with an affirmation of the prophecy of Muhammad; “Muhammad is the prophet of God” (*Muḥammad rasūl Allāh*). The stories of prophets are

⁶⁶ Q 2:2, 185; 3:138; 16:64; 17:9; 29:69;

⁶⁷ Q 31:10; 88:17-20.

⁶⁸ Q 21:22; 12:39; 23:91; 17:42.

a major theme and the Qur'an presents all the prophets as preaching the same essential message of the oneness of God to their communities.⁶⁹

We never sent any messenger before you (Muhammad) without revealing to him: 'There is no god but Me, so worship Me'. (Q 21:25)

We have sent revelation to you, (Muhammad) as We did to Noah and the prophets after him, to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon – to David we gave the book (of Psalms). (Q 4:163)

The Qur'anic view of prophecy, then, takes us to a universal and primordial declaration of monotheism. But this gives the condemnation of *shirk* an equally ancient pedigree. A recurring theme is that the prophets preach the message of *tawhīd* amidst communities that have been led astray from this truth. Often, the language of *shirk* is explicit. The prophet Abraham declares to this community:

Why should I fear what you associate with Him (*mā ashraḳtum*)? Why do you not fear to associate with Him things for which He has sent down no authority. Tell me, if you know the answer, which side has more right to feel secure? (Q 6:81)

The sin of *shirk* is not new. It is deeply rooted in history and condemned by all prophets. The prophet *Hūd* denounces his people and declares; "I am free of whatever you associate with God!" (*annī birri'un mim mā tushrikūn*).⁷⁰ Elsewhere the presence of *shirk* is strongly implied. The story of the prophet Moses, for example, includes the account of the calf taken for worship by the children of Israel.⁷¹ The prophet Noah condemns the "gods" worshipped by his community.⁷² In a passage that can be read as a general summation of prophecy, the Qur'an lists eighteen prophets, from Abraham, Noah, David, Solomon, Job among others, and concludes; "if they had associated with God (*wa law ashraḳū*), all their deeds would have come to nothing."⁷³ This passage conveys the universal nature of prophecy and the shared rejection of all the prophets against *shirk*.

Yet the Qur'an argues that the prophets are sent only to reaffirm a truth that we already know. From the Qur'anic perspective, all human beings are created with an innate sense of 'no god but God'. Knowledge of *tawhīd* is central to what it means to be human. This is expressed in later Islamic tradition as the idea of the *fiṭra* or 'natural disposition', often ascribed to the following verse in which God is seen to question mankind about Himself before creation:

When your Lord took from Adam's children, from their (very) loins, their offspring and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, 'Am I not your Lord?' and they replied, 'Yes, we bear witness.' So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, 'We were not aware of this'... (Q 7:172).

⁶⁹ There are repeated themes around prophecy in the Qur'an; the prophet will preach to his community, face hostility until God eventually punishes the unbelieving community on account of their rejection of the prophet. These themes are so strong that Devin Stewart describes the Qur'anic prophets as moulded to fit the pattern, rather than the reverse. See Devin Stewart. 'Prophecy', in Jamal J. Elias, ed. *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications 2010), 286.

⁷⁰ Q 11:53-4. The same claim is expressed by Abraham (Q 6:78) and Muhammad (Q 6:19).

⁷¹ Q 7:148-9; 20:87-93.

⁷² Q 11:15; 29:14; 71:23.

⁷³ Q 6:83-88.

For figures like Ibn Taymiyya, the *fiṭra* has an epistemological function and means that all believers have an instinctive ability to choose from a range of legal rulings that which is closest to the truth.⁷⁴ The Qur'an and later tradition thus view the Islamic conception of monotheism or *tawḥīd* as intrinsic to human nature. Any deviation from *tawḥīd* becomes a deviation from our natural state. For this reason the very next verse in the Qur'an ties the idea of *fiṭra* to a warning against *shirk*:

...or (that you say), "It was our forefathers who, before us, associated with God (*innamā ashrakā abā'unā*), and we were only the descendants who came after them: will you destroy us because of the deeds of those who invented falsehood?" (Q 7:173)

In this way the Qur'an presents *shirk* as not just a rejection of the true nature of God, nor a denial of the message of all the prophets and the evidence of the natural world. *Shirk* is, ultimately, a denial of oneself. Created with an innate awareness of *tawḥīd*, *shirk* is a rejection of our natural state.

Outline of chapter

This chapter addresses the central question of what it means to 'associate' with God. It explores three major Qur'anic reflections on *shirk*. These are the narratives of Abraham, Jesus and the opponents of the Prophet, called the *mushrikūn*. This does not aim at an exhaustive account but each of these reflections offers a different avenue for exploring the meaning of *shirk*. Taken together, they reveal that while the condemnation of *shirk* is a constant refrain, the Qur'an has many ways of expressing what it means to 'associate' with God and speaks of *shirk* across a rich variety of images and contexts. As will be shown, the Qur'anic material on *shirk* ranges from a failure to recognise the one true God, to a belief in God but a failure to worship Him correctly. The story of Abraham refers to many forms of *shirk* but centers on his confrontation with the idols worshipped by his community. The Qur'an also discusses *shirk* in relation to purported beliefs around Jesus and in several verses accuses Christians of elevating Jesus and his mother to the level of divinity. Addressing the Prophet in its immediate Arabian environment, the Qur'an gives a complex, allusive and even ambiguous account of contemporary *shirk*. In the Qur'an itself, then, the idea of 'associating' with God is expressed in multiple ways. But this is perhaps not surprising. As Daud Rahbar notes, such a digressive treatment of a major concept is in fact a common feature of scripture:

What is expected of a great book of revelation is not absolute logical consistency, but consistency of the dominance of an idea. Prophets do not offer philosophy. They offer wisdom of a type, a wisdom which has a dominant note.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theology of Perpetual Optimism* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 39-44. Livnat Holtzman. 'Human Choice, Divine Guidance and the Fiṭra Tradition; the use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya', in Yossef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, ed. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011); 163-191.

⁷⁵ Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice* (Leiden, 1960), 721.

This has implications for how we translate the term. We often find *shirk* translated as “polytheism” or “idolatry” in English-language scholarship.⁷⁶ An idolater or polytheist has of course taken other objects or gods alongside God and would therefore be accused of *shirk*. The unique condemnation of *shirk* in the Qur’an also echoes the central sin of idolatry in wider monotheist tradition. But it could be argued that ‘idolatry’ is not a satisfactory translation of *shirk*. Semantically, there is no link between *shirk* and ‘idolatry’ as the Arabic terms for idols, *ṣanam and wathan*, are etymologically distinct from *shirk*. Terms like ‘*ibādat al-aṣnām* or *al-wathaniyya* would be more faithful Arabic translations of ‘idolatry’, yet these terms are not used in the Qur’an. More fundamentally, it will be shown that *shirk* conveys far more than just idolatry in a literal sense. While idol worship is one form of *shirk*, the Qur’anic notion of ‘associating’ with God is much broader and cannot be reduced to a single image. For this reason, this chapter retains a linguistic translation of *shirk* as ‘association’ with God.

This lies at the heart of the present chapter. This chapter ultimately aims to illustrate and explore what is the most salient aspect of the concept of *shirk*. As a denial of the oneness and uniqueness of God, the condemnation of *shirk* is integral to the monotheistic message of the Qur’an. But alongside this sits a Qur’anic discourse on *shirk* that is complex, multi-faceted and even highly allusive. ‘Association’ with God is condemned in the strongest terms, but also conceived in a rich variety of ways. *Shirk* is a central but equally complex, layered and dynamic category in the Qur’an. It is to this that we now turn.

***Shirk* in the Qur’anic story of Abraham**

Referenced in over two hundred verses, Abraham is a major pre-Islamic prophet. The Qur’an praises Abraham as “truthful” (*ṣiddīq*), “gracious” (*ḥalīm*) and, uniquely, the “friend of God” (*khalīl Allāh*).⁷⁷ Aspects of the Abraham narrative in the Qur’an parallel the Biblical account but the Qur’an also stresses Abraham as a spiritual precursor to Muḥammad and his community. Both the Qur’an and later tradition credit Abraham and his son Ishmael for establishing the ‘House’ (*al-bayt*), understood as the *ka’ba* in Mecca, as a sanctuary for God and for implementing the rites of pilgrimage such as circumambulation, prostration and prayer.⁷⁸ The epithet ‘the community of Abraham’ (*millat ibrahīm*) occurs in eight verses to describe Muhammad and his community.⁷⁹ The Qur’an also describes Abraham as a *ḥanīf*.⁸⁰ An enigmatic term, in one verse *ḥanīf* appears as a synonym of *muslim*:

⁷⁶ Muhammad Ibrahim H. Surty, *The Qur’anic Concept of al-Shirk (Polytheism)* (London, 1982), 23. (“Shirk in shari’ah means polytheism or idolatry. Since a man associates other creation with the Creator has been regarded as polytheist (Mushrik).”) For an example of English-language scholarship that translates *shirk* as ‘idolatry’ and *mushrik* as ‘idolater’, see Jane McAuliffe, *Qur’an Christians: an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷⁷ For ‘very truthful’ see Q 19:41, for ‘gracious’ see Q 9:114; 11:75 and, for ‘the friend of God’, see Q 4:125.

⁷⁸ Q 2:125-129; 3:96-7; 22:26-7. See Reuven Firestone. ‘Abraham’s association with the Meccan sanctuary and the pilgrimage in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods’, *Museon* 104 (1991); 365-93. Gerald Hawting. ‘The Origins of the Muslim sanctuary at Mecca’, in G.H.A. Juynboll, ed. *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society* (Carbondale, 1982); 23-47.

⁷⁹ Q 2:130, 135; 3:95; 4:125; 6:161; 12:38; 16:123; 22:78.

⁸⁰ Q 2:135; 3:67, 95; 4:125; 6:79, 161; 16:120, 123. For the meaning and origins of the term: D.S. Margoliouth. ‘On the Origin and Import of the Names Muslim and Ḥanīf’, *Journal of Asiatic Society* (July 1903); 467-93. C.J. Lyall. ‘The Words “Ḥanīf” and “Muslim”’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (October, 1903); 771-84. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’an*, 112-

Abraham was neither a Jew nor Christian. He was a *ḥanīf*, a *muslim*, and not one of the *mushrikūn*, the people closest to him and those who truly follow his ways. (Q 3:67)

The meaning of *ḥanīf* is debated in exegetical tradition and scholarship, though it is generally seen to denote a non-denominational, monotheistic category and to allude to an indigenous monotheism in Arabia that pre-dates the prophecy of Muhammad.⁸¹ Islamic tradition preserves the names of those its calls *ḥunafā'*, like 'Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh and Zayd ibn 'Amr ibn Nufayl, who are said to have rejected idol worship and remained monotheistic followers of Abraham in the time before the Prophet.⁸²

Abraham is thus a spiritual archetype in the Qur'an for the Prophet and his community. Spread over twenty-five chapters, the Qur'anic story of Abraham covers a rich variety of episodes and much of this narrative centers on his encounter with various manifestations of *shirk*. We see this across three distinct episodes. In the first, the explicit language of *shirk* is absent but the idea is strongly implied. This is when Abraham debates an unidentified king whom arrogantly claims divinity for himself:

Have you not thought about the man who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because God had given him power to rule (*al-mulk*)? When Abraham said, 'It is my Lord who gives life and death', he said, 'I too give life and death.' So Abraham said, 'God brings the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west.' The unbeliever was dumbfounded: God does not guide those who do evil (Q 2:258)

This echoes the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh, as the latter similarly declares himself a god.⁸³ Exegetes identify the nameless king as Nimrod, a borrowing from Jewish-Christian sources. Ibn Kathīr writes that this debate occurred in Abraham's youth and God subsequently sent a gnat to enter Nimrod's head through his nose, torturing him to death.⁸⁴ Abraham's triumph in this debate reflects the central Qur'anic theme that the natural world is replete with signs of God, in this case the rising and setting of the sun. These signs confound the king and reveal the error of his self-deification. We see this in another scene. In this second image, Abraham reflects upon natural phenomena such as the sun, moon and stars and here the language of *shirk* is explicit:

We showed Abraham (God's) mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer. When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord', but when it set, he said, 'I do not like things that set'. And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord', but when it too set, he said, 'If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray'. Then he saw the sun rising and cried, 'This is my Lord! This is greater.' But when the sun set, he said, 'My people, I disown what you associate with God (*mimmā tushrikūn*). I have turned my face to he who

5. Richard Bell. 'Who were the Ḥanīfs?', *Moslem World* 20 (1930); 120-4. Andrew Rippin. 'Rahmān and the Ḥanīfs', in W.B. Hallaq and D.P. Little, ed. *Islamic Studies Presented to Charles J. Adams* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); 154-168. Mu'nim Sirry. 'The Early Development of the Qur'anic Ḥanīf', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56:2-1 (2011); 345-66. Francois De. Blois. 'Nasrani and Hanif; Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and Islam', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65 (2002), 17-30.

⁸¹ Sirry. 'The Early Development of the Qur'anic Ḥanīf', 355-66. De. Blois. 'Nasrani and Hanif', 17-18. For seven classical commentary discussions of the term: Athamina Khalil. 'Abraham in Islamic Perspective; Reflections on the development of monotheism in pre-Islamic Arabia', *Der Islam* 81:2 (2004); 184-205. H.A.R. Gibb. 'Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia', *Harvard Theological Review* 55/4 (1962); 269-280.

⁸² Abū Ubayda, Mu'amār Ibn al-Muthannā al-Taymī. *Majāz al-Qur'an* (Miṣr: al-Khānjī, 1954-62), 1/58. Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra*, ed. al-Saqqā (Beirut, 1971), 1/237-47.

⁸³ See Q 79:24.

⁸⁴ Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets*, trans. Rashad Ahmad Azami (London: Darussalam, 2003), 152-3.

created the heavens and the earth, as a *ḥanīf*, and I am not of those who associate with God (*wa mā anā min al-mushrikīn*) (Q 6:75-79).

Exegetes view this passage to reflect a process of natural insight and deduction (*al-naẓar wa al-istidlāl*) by which Abraham, reflecting upon the natural world, is led to belief in God.⁸⁵ But the verses also imply that Abraham, a prophet, mistakes natural phenomena for his Lord and briefly engages in astral worship, thus committing *shirk*. Uncomfortable with this, al-Rāzī (d. 1209) notes the disagreement among exegetes as to whether this occurred before or after Abraham became a prophet. Al-Rāzī places this before his prophecy but insists it is of no importance and lists twelve reasons why Abraham's statements are not meant at face value. This includes the view that Abraham only cites the beliefs of his opponents; either by way of derision (*al-istihzā'*) or as a ploy to get opponents to listen to his argument (*yastadrijuhum ilā istimā'a al-hujja*).⁸⁶ For exegetes like al-Rāzī it is inconceivable that the prophet Abraham, sent by God to deliver the message of the oneness of God, would commit *shirk*. Verses that suggest precisely this must be interpreted otherwise.

Moving to the third episode, the dominant image of *shirk* in the Abraham narrative is his encounter with the idols of his community. Nowhere in the Qur'an is the error of *shirk* so explicitly identified with idolatry in a literal sense, nor the rejection of this as absolute, as in the story of Abraham. In the Qur'an the terms for idol (*aṣṇām/ṣanam, awthān/wathan*) are found almost exclusively in the Abraham narrative.⁸⁷ Abraham appears to use the terms interchangeably;

Remember when Abraham said to his father, Azār, 'How can you take idols (*aṣṇām*) as gods? I see that you and your people have clearly gone astray'. (Q 6:74)

(Abraham said) 'What you worship in place of God are mere idols (*awthān*); what you invent is nothing but falsehood. (Q 29:17)

The difference between *ṣanam* and *wathan* is not clear. Later Muslim tradition struggles to distinguish the terms. For al-Suhaylī (d. 1185): "the word *ṣanam* is applied to an idol made from stone or other material, while *wathan* is used of something other than stone, like bronze and similar material."⁸⁸ Edward William-Lane presents a range of interpretations including the opposite view; *ṣanam* refers to an idol made from metal, with *wathan* made from stone or wood. Another view is that *ṣanam* refers to an image, with *wathan* a shapeless object, or that *ṣanam* specifies human form or any corporeal object.⁸⁹ The historian Hishām al-Kalbī (d. 819) offers two contradictory interpretations in the *Book of Idols*

⁸⁵ Ibn 'Aǧība, *al-Baḥr al-Madīd*, 2/274.

⁸⁶ Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, 2/42-8.

⁸⁷ Q 6:74; 14:35; 21:57; 26:71; 29:17, 25. For use of the term in the story of Moses; 7:138.

⁸⁸ Al-Suhaylī, Abū al-Qāsim 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Abdullāh. *Al-Rawḍ al-Unūf fī sharḥ al-sīra li-Ibn Hishām*, (Cairo, 1914), 1/62. C.f A. Guillaume. 'Stroking an Idol', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 27:2 (1964); 430.

⁸⁹ See Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 1/1735-6. For further exploration of the diversity of interpretation found in tradition, see Fiorella Scagliarini. 'The words ṣlm/ṣnm and some words for "statue, idol" in Arabic and other Semitic languages', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 37 (2007); 253-62. A. Guillaume. 'Stroking an Idol', 430.

(*Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*).⁹⁰ Both terms refer to idols and it seems Abraham treats them interchangeably, even if the precise differences remain unclear.

Abraham repeatedly stresses the error of idol worship and contrasts the power and majesty of God with the perceived powerlessness and inefficacy of the humanly constructed idols. He encourages his father and community to reflect upon the nature of idolatry. The essence of his argument is that in contrast to God, idols are nothing but inert, inanimate matter:

When Abraham asked his father and his people, ‘What do you worship? They said, ‘we worship idols (*aṣṅām*), and we are devoted to them’. He asked, ‘Do they hear you when you call? Do they help or harm you? They replied, ‘No, but this is what we saw our fathers doing’. Abraham said, ‘Those idols that you have worshipped, you and your forefathers, are my enemies; not so the Lord of the worlds’ (Q 26:77-83.

But Abraham does not just condemn idols; he smashes them. While other prophets like Moses (7:142-151) or Noah (71:23-4) try to dissuade people from the worship of other than God, Abraham takes this a step further. He is an iconoclast in the Qur’an. The episodes are worth citing in full:

(Abraham said) ‘By God, I shall certainly outwit your idols as soon as you have turned your backs! He broke them all into pieces, but left the biggest one for them to return to. They said, ‘Who has done this to our gods? How wicked must he be!’ Some said, ‘We heard a youth called Abraham talking about them.’ They said, ‘Bring him before the eyes of the people, so that they may witness (his trial).’ They asked, ‘Was it you, Abraham, who did this to your gods?’ He said, ‘No, it was done by the biggest of them – this one. Ask them, if they can talk’. (Q 21:57-64)

He (Abraham) said, ‘I am sick, so (his people) turned away from him and left. He turned to their gods and said, ‘Do you not eat? Why do you not speak?’ Then he turned and struck them with his right hand. (Q 37:89-94).

Destroying idols is thus constitutive of preaching the oneness of God. Yet this serves a didactic function: the rationale for the destruction of idols is to spur reflection on the part of his community as to the idols’ inherent inefficacy. This is a common theme in monotheist literature. The idea that the destruction of idols proves the falsity of idolatry is found across Jewish, Christian and Muslim sources.⁹¹ But this, of course, gives only one side of the argument. Jan Assman argues that the nature of idolatrous belief and practice is much richer and more sophisticated than its monotheist critics allow. In a critical assessment of the Old Testament critique of pre-Biblical idolatry, Assman writes;

Within the horizon of monotheism, the error of idolatry lies...in the incapacity to understand the senselessness of one’s actions. The other religions that are built around the cultic scene with image, ritual, and recitation are debunked as sheer nonsense... (But) this view of cult images is extremely unfair and reductive, because no Egyptian or Babylonian would mistake a statue for a god. An image becomes a

⁹⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī, Abu-l-Mundhir. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, ed. Ahmad Zakī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li al-Ṭibā’a wa al-nashr, 1964). For the English translation see Nabih Amin Faris, trans. *The Book of Idols: Being a translation from the Arabic of the Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952). 47. (‘If a statue were made of wood, or gold, or silver, after a human form, it would be an idol (*ṣanam*); but if it were made of stone it would be an image (*wathan*). For an opposite description, see *The Book of Idols*, 58.

⁹¹ Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion; Religion Art, Perception and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: from Polemic to History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Jan Assman. ‘What’s Wrong with Images?’, in Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, ed. *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 25-6.

medium for establishing contact with the divine only after complex rites of consecration and investiture, only temporarily, and only within the special, temporal and social frames of the cultic scene.⁹²

We get no sense of this from the Qur'an. Here, the prophet Abraham reduces the idol to its base material and presumes the foolishness of its worship. In this, the Qur'an draws on a common trope in monotheist polemics against idolatry. But more significantly, it identifies *shirk* with idol worship in a literal sense and links the doctrine of the oneness and uniqueness of God, or *tawhīd*, with an ethic of idol destruction.

Shirk, Jesus and Christianity in the Qur'an

Abraham's encounter with *shirk* extends across a range of episodes. It points to several ways of expressing what it means to 'associate' with God, from self-deification and astral worship to literal idol worship. Abraham receives special recognition in recent times as a unifying figure across the traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.⁹³ Yet in the Qur'an there is a clear sense of contestation over Abraham as to which community are his true descendants. The Qur'an presents Abraham as a spiritual precursor to the Prophet and uses his status as a *ḥanīf* in sharp contradistinction to Jewish and Christian claims;

Abraham was neither a Jew nor Christian. He was a *ḥanīf*, a *muslim*, and not one of the *mushrikūn*, (Q 3:65-7)

They say, 'Become Jews and Christians and you will be rightly guided.' Say, (Prophet), 'No, (ours is) the religion of Abraham (*millat ibrahīm*), the upright (*ḥanīfan*), who was not one of the *mushrikīn* (Q 2:135).⁹⁴

This continues in later Muslim tradition. The Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb reportedly introduced himself as *al-Shaykh al-Ḥanīf* to a Christian.⁹⁵ It would seem the Qur'an uses Jesus in a similar way. Another major prophet in the Qur'an, Jesus is affirmed as a "word from God" and the "messiah".⁹⁶ The Qur'an includes the story of the virgin birth.⁹⁷ These are not understood on Christian terms: like all the prophets, the Qur'anic Jesus is seen to preach the universal message of the oneness of God and even anticipates the prophecy of Muhammad after him.⁹⁸ The Qur'anic Jesus fits into a general conception of prophecy.

There is a large body of scholarship exploring the Qur'an's engagement with Christian doctrine.⁹⁹ Many of these works also explore the question of historical influences and the forms of Christianity that were

⁹² Assman. 'What's Wrong with Images', 25-7.

⁹³ See for example B. Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: W. Morrow, 2002).

⁹⁴ On this point see Reuven Fireston. 'A problem with monotheism; Judaism, Christianity and Islam in dialogue and dissent' in Bradford Hinze, ed. *Heirs of Abraham; The Future of Muslim, Jewish and Christian Relations* (New York; Orbis Books, 2005); 20-54. Also the chapter entitled 'My Abraham is better than yours' in Aaron Hughes, *Abrahamic Religions; on the uses and abuses of history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹⁵ Ibn Abī Shayba. *Al-Muṣannaḥī al-aḥādīth wa al-āthār*, ed. 'Abd al-Khāliq al-Afghānī (Bombay, India: 1979-83), 3/199

⁹⁶ Q 3:45

⁹⁷ Q 19:19-22.

⁹⁸ Q 61:6

⁹⁹ David Marshall. 'Christianity in the Qur'an', in Lloyd Ridgeon, ed. *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (Richmond; Curzon Press, 2001); 3-30. Jon Hoover. 'Revelation and the Islamic and Christian Doctrines of God', *Islamochristiana* 30

said to be present in the Qur'an's late antique Arabian milieu.¹⁰⁰ Briefly, the Qur'an has various names for Christians. The term *naṣārā* is used in fourteen verses. One verse refers to the "people of the Gospel" (*ahl al-injīl*, 5:47). The most common term is the "people of the book" (*ahl al-kitāb*), a Qur'anic title understood to refer to Jews and Christians as fellow scripturaries in receipt of divine revelation.¹⁰¹ The Qur'an appears highly ambivalent towards those it calls Christians, joining praise with criticism. On the one hand, Christians are described as those "nearest in amity" to Muslims.¹⁰² They have mercy in their hearts.¹⁰³ The Qur'an describes itself as confirming previous revelation and accepts Christians as fellow worshippers of one God.¹⁰⁴ Yet elsewhere, the Qur'an accuses Christians of having distorted the original texts and of deliberately concealing parts of their revelation.¹⁰⁵ Despite receiving revelation, they reject the Prophet and wish for Muslims to embrace their religion.¹⁰⁶

This reflects a deeper doctrinal tension. Though recipients of revelation, a common theme in the Qur'an is the accusation that Christians exaggerate (*ghulū*) in religion. The Qur'an contains several verses that have been interpreted as rejecting the doctrines of Trinity, Incarnation and sonship of Jesus. Numerous Qur'anic verses reject the idea that God has a son.¹⁰⁷ Indeed all chapters that extensively reference Jesus include a denial that God has a son and stress Jesus as no more than a messenger.¹⁰⁸ The clear sense is that Christians have in some way violated the oneness of God and elevated Jesus to the level of divinity. The language here includes both *kufr* and *shirk*:

They have disbelieved (*laqad kafarū*) who say, 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary'. The Messiah himself said, 'Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord.' If anyone associates with God (*man yushrik bi-llāh*) God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. (Q 5:72)

Other verses do not explicitly mention *shirk* but do however strongly imply it;

People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was but a messenger of God, His word directed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not say 'three' – stop (this), that is better for you – God is only one God, He is far above having a son. (Q 4:171)

(2004); 1-14; 'Islamic Monotheism and the Trinity', *The Conrad Grebel Review* 27:1 (Winter 2009); 57-82. Mu'nim Sirry. *Scriptural Polemics; The Qur'an and other Religions* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2014), 133-166.

¹⁰⁰ For an example of this approach; De Blois. 'Nasrani and Hanif', 1-17. Also see Barbara Finster. 'Arabia in Late Antiquity: An Outline of the Cultural Situation in the Peninsula at the Time of Muhammad', in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx, ed. *The Qur'an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'anic Milieu* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010); 61-115; Iwona Gajda. 'Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia', in Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook, ed. *Islam and its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity and the Qur'an* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2017); 247-256. Robert Hoyland. 'Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion', in S.F Johnson, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1071-2.

¹⁰¹ For a critical analysis of this term: Adolfo Gonzales Montes. 'The Challenge of Islamic Monotheism; a Christian View', Hans Kung and Jurgen Moltmann, eds. *Islam: A Challenge for Christianity* (London; SCM Press, 1947), 69-70.

¹⁰² Q 5:82.

¹⁰³ Q 57:27.

¹⁰⁴ Q 3:64; 5 :48.

¹⁰⁵ Q 2:42, 140, 146, 159; 3:71, 187; 5:15; 5:13, 41; 6:91

¹⁰⁶ Q 2:120-123.

¹⁰⁷ Q 2:116; 4:171; 5:17, 72-73; 9:30-31; 10:68; 17:11;18:4-5; 19:34, 88-89.

¹⁰⁸ Q 4:171; 19:88-93.

These verses underpin the view in later Islamic tradition that belief in the Trinity contradicts the doctrine of *tawhīd* and represents a particular, Christian form of *shirk*. As early as the eighth century, for example, inscriptions inside the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem include verses rejecting the idea that God has an associate (*sharīk*) and call for victory over the *mushrikūn* - in this context, likely aimed at Christians.¹⁰⁹ Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) applies the prohibition of marrying female ‘associators’ (*mushrikāt*, 2:221) to Christian women.¹¹⁰ Al-Ghazālī writes curtly that the proclamation of no god but God (*lā ilāha illā ’llāh*) rebuts the Trinity.¹¹¹ Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) neatly summarises;

You may not point to any human being, with delimitations and a date of birth, and say simply, “That person is God”. To the Qur’an, that is neither possible, nor intelligible, nor pardonable... For the Qur’an, then, Jesus can be as little an incarnation of God as Muhammad himself or, indeed, any other prophet.
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This is another Qur’anic reflection on *shirk*. The image of ‘association’ with God in this context is not the worship of the self, heavenly bodies or idols, as with Abraham, but to Christian beliefs of the nature of Jesus. The Qur’an seems to accuse those it calls *al-naṣārā* or ‘people of the book’ of having a mistaken conception of God and of ‘associating’ the prophet Jesus with some share of divinity.

Upon closer inspection the nature of the Qur’anic critique poses difficulties. Many verses point to a discrepancy between the Qur’anic account and mainstream Christian self-understanding. Christians do not describe God as the “third of three” (*thālith al-thalātha*, 5:73) as the Qur’an claims, for example, and several verses seem to understand the Trinity to consist of God, Jesus and Mary, not the Father, son and holy spirit.¹¹³ The verse 5:116 alludes to Christian *shirk* but on the problematic grounds that Jesus and his mother, Mary, are taken for worship as ‘two gods besides God’:

When God says, ‘Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, “Take me and my mother as two gods besides God?”’ he will say, ‘May You be exalted!’ I would never say what I had no right to say – if I had said any such thing you would have known it; You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within you.’ (Q 5:116).

These verses raise the question of whether the Qur’an reflects a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine, or condemns only certain Christian heresies present in its Arabian milieu.¹¹⁴ Verse 5:116, for example, is often explained by scholars by citing the *Panarion* of Epiphanius (d. 403), a Christian heresiography that speaks of a hitherto unknown sect, the ‘Collyridians’, who were said to worship the Virgin Mary and were based in Arabia. In this way Geoffrey Parrinder explains the nature and import of 5:116:

¹⁰⁹ C. Kessler. ‘Abd al-Malik’s Inscription in the Dome of the Rock, a Reconsideration’, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1970 (1970); 2-14. Oleg Grabar. ‘The Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem’, *Ars Orientalis* 3 (1959); 53-5.

¹¹⁰ Cited from Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 48.

¹¹¹ Al-Ghazālī. *Kitāb al-’Ilm/The Book of Knowledge; Book 1 of the Ihyā’ ’Ulūm al-Dīn: The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. Kenneth Honerkamp and Intro. Hamza Yusuf Hanson (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), 92. .

¹¹² Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an* 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 168-9.

¹¹³ Q 4:171; 5:17, 70-75.

¹¹⁴ For a sampling of this: Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Cass, 1968), 20. De Blois. ‘Nasrani and Hanif’, 1-17. S.K. Samir. ‘The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur’an: A Reflection’, in G.S. Reynolds, ed. *The Qur’an in its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008); 141-62.

The Collyridians, an Arabian female sect of the fourth century, offered to Mary cakes of bread (*colyrida*) as they had done to the great earth mother in pagan times... The Qur'an may well be directed against this heresy. It gives it support against Mariolatry, while at the same time it recognises the importance of Mary as the vessel chosen by God for the birth of Christ.¹¹⁵

This approach is rooted in a basic assumption that the Qur'an gives an accurate, objective record of the Christian doctrines and communities that it encounters. But there is another way of reading these verses. A more recent trend of scholarship argues for a deeper appreciation of the creative use of rhetoric, polemics and hyperbole in the Qur'an's treatment of Christianity. The search for Christian heresies to explain certain verses overlooks, perhaps, the role of argumentation in the Qur'an, its ability to exaggerate, caricature and even satirise the views of Christians. As Sidney Griffith writes:

Hermeneutically speaking, an important corollary of the recognition of the Qur'an's intention polemically to criticise Christian belief and practice is the further recognition that in the service of this purpose the Qur'an rhetorically does not simply report or repeat what Christians say; it reproves what they say, corrects it, or caricatures it.¹¹⁶

The Qur'an does not record the views of Christians, then, but it condemns and even caricatures such in the course of debates over the true understanding of God. Griffith gives another way of reading of 5:116:

The Qur'an's seeming misstatement, rhetorically speaking, should therefore not be thought to be a mistake, but rather a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief, from an Islamic perspective.¹¹⁷

This affects our reading of the critique of Christian *shirk*. Verses that allude to *shirk* in relation to Christian doctrine, claiming that Christians say God is 'the third of three' or take Mary as a god, should not, perhaps, be taken at face value. Rather, these can be read as rhetorical and hyperbolic ways of expressing the core point that Christians have, in some way, exaggerated in their beliefs around Jesus and Mary and violated the oneness of God. Gabriel Reynolds asks of 5:116; "could it be that the Qur'an is taunting Christians by intentionally exaggerating their devotion to Mary? Could this verse be more about the Qur'an's creative rhetoric and less about the Collyridians?"¹¹⁸

Following this, the need to locate Christian heresies in the Qur'anic milieu disappears entirely. It is also worth noting, briefly, that we find traces of this approach in the Islamic tradition. Aware that Christians deny taking Mary and Jesus as 'two gods besides God', the Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025) argues that 5:116 is only rhetorical; Jesus, he writes, would not claim to be a god besides God. Moreover, Abd al-Jabbār insists that Christian veneration of Mary is equivalent to her worship and that the Eastern

¹¹⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 133. Bell, *The Origin*, 20. See also W. M. Watt, 'The Christianity criticized in the Qur'an', *Muslim World* 57 (1967); 197-201. W.M. Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 158. Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: an exploration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 289-95. Chowkat Moucarray, *Faith to Faith; Christianity and Islam in Dialogue* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 184-95.

¹¹⁶ Sidney Griffith, "Al-Naşārā in the Qur'an: A Hermeneutical Reflection," in Gabriel Said Reynolds, ed., *New Perspectives on the Qur'an; The Qur'an in its Historical Context 2* (London: Routledge, 2011), 311

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds. 'On the Presentation of Christianity in the Qur'an and the Many Aspects of Qur'anic Rhetoric', *Al-Bayān-Journal of Qur'an and Ḥadīth Studies* 12 (2014), 53-4.

Churches' expression of Mary as the 'mother of God' (*theotokos*) confirms this.¹¹⁹ The Shī'ī thinker Muḥammad Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981) argues much the same. Christians do not believe in the divinity of Mary, he concedes, but their veneration of her means that they have, in effect, taken her as a god:

There is a *salāt* which contains her prayer, praise, call for help and intercession; there is also a fast ascribed to her and named after her; and all this is joined with humility to her remembrance, and to her pictures and images, combined with the belief in her authority... That authority, according to their belief, enables her to bring benefit and harm in this world and the next, either by herself or through her son. They have clearly declared that it is incumbent to worship her. However, we do not know of any of their sects which would use the word "goddess" for her.¹²⁰

There remains a sense here of a problem that needs to be solved. Exegetes like 'Abd al-Jabbār and Ṭabāṭabā'ī reconcile this verse with the fact it does not, at first, seem to correctly depict Christian belief. Stressing the rhetorical aspect of 5:116 or the reality of Christian veneration of Mary allows exegetes to defend the truth and accuracy of the Qur'an and maintain the charge that Christians are guilty of *shirk*. The Qur'anic material on Christianity constitutes another major reflection on *shirk*, then, but this is elusive and complex. It is not clear what Christians are being addressed in its verses, nor the exact nature of their beliefs and practices. The Qur'an has various ways of alluding to *shirk* in relation to Christian doctrine and this has been taken to indicate the presence of Christian heretics, or the Qur'an's own creative use of rhetoric and hyperbole. All we are left with from the Qur'an is a recurring image of a category, referred to as Christians, that are said to have in some sense violated the oneness of God by 'associating' Jesus and his mother, Mary, to the level of divinity.

The *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an

Much of this applies to our third and final reflection on *shirk*. This is the Qur'anic material on the opponents of the Prophet, called the 'associators' (*mushrikūn*) or 'those who associate with God' (*alladhīna ashrakū*). Allusions, debates and condemnations of this group form a significant part of the Qur'an and comprise by some distance its largest reflection on *shirk*. Yet much of the Qur'an's material on these opponents is similarly complex and elusive. As will be shown, the Qur'an frequently alludes to these opponents but gives little insight into the nature of this group or the *shirk* of which they are accused. We see little specific beyond a recurring image of a group of opponents accused, in some way, of 'associating' a host of unidentified objects and beings with God. This allusion extends even to how the Qur'an addresses the group. It would seem that references to these opponents far exceed the explicit use of the term '*mushrikūn*'. There seems overlap between the two main terms for the opponents of the Prophet, *mushrikūn* and unbelievers (*kāfirūn*), with many verses condemning 'unbelievers' in ways that are highly suggestive of *shirk*:

¹¹⁹ 'Abd al-Jabbār. *Critique of Christian Origins = Tathbīt Dalā'il al-Nubuwwa / 'Abd al-Jabbār; a parallel English-Arabic Text*, ed. and trans. G.S.Reynolds and S.K. Samir (Provo, UT; Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 80-85. Jon Hoover. 'Early and Medieval Muslim Attitudes towards Christian Doctrines', in David Thomas, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018), 172.

¹²⁰ Cited in Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 157-8.

The unbelievers (*alladhīna kafarū*) set up equals (*andād*) to their Lord. (Q 6:1)

The unbelievers (*alladhīna kafarū*) think it strange that a prophet of their own people has come to warn them; they say, ‘He is just a lying sorcerer. How can he claim that all the gods are but one God? What an astonishing thing!’ Their leaders depart, saying, ‘Walk away, stay faithful to you gods!’ (Q 38:4-6)

The *mushrikūn* can of course be considered unbelievers in the sense of their disbelief in the doctrine of the oneness of God and the prophecy of Muhammad.¹²¹ In many verses they are seen to disbelieve in the Hereafter, Last Day and bodily resurrection.¹²² Other verses call the Prophet’s opponents “deniers” (*al-mukadhdhibūn*).¹²³ Yet other verses allude to *shirk* without using the term. Allusive condemnations of what is worshipped (*mā ta‘budūn*) or called upon (*mā tad‘ūn*) in place of God are a case in point.¹²⁴

They worship in place of God things that can neither benefit nor harm them. (Q 25:55)

God alone is the truth (*al-ḥaqq*) and what they call upon in place of God is falsehood. (*bāṭil*) (Q 22:62)

Taken altogether, we have no reason to doubt the common assumption that the Qur’an targets one and the same group of opponents of the Prophet, using a host of titles, for their perceived *shirk* and denial of key doctrines like the prophecy of Muhammad and the Last Judgement.¹²⁵

The question arises as to the identity of these opponents and the nature of their *shirk*. Briefly, the Islamic historical tradition offers an image of mass idolatry in pre-Islamic Arabia. Opponents of the Prophet in Mecca are depicted as worshipping idols of stone and wood that represented diverse deities. The early historian Hishām Ibn al-Kalbī gives the following image of pre-Islamic Mecca:

No one left Mecca without carrying away with him a stone from the stones of the Sacred House (ka‘ba) as a token of reverence to it, and as a sign of deep affection... Wherever he settled he would erect the stone and circumambulate it in the same manner as with the ka‘ba, seeking its blessing thereby... in time this led them to the worship of whatever took their fancy, and caused them to forget their former worship. Consequently, they came to the worship of idols ... like nations before them.¹²⁶

Ibn al-Kalbī and others elaborate on the names, features, history and tribal affiliations of idols. This is explored in detail in the next chapter. The obvious question, then, is to what extent this image accords with the account of the *mushrikūn* in the Qur’an? Crucially, it is far from clear. Almost all the Qur’anic references to idols (*aṣṇām*, *awthān*) occur in the stories of earlier prophets, particularly Abraham.¹²⁷ The exception is verse 22:30, the only verse in which a term for idols refers to the Prophet’s environment.

¹²¹ M. Waldman. ‘The Development of the concept of Kufr in the Qur’an’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968); 442-55. See p. 447 (“the major development of *kufr* (in the Qur’an) is that, though it continues to be used in other meanings, it becomes increasingly connected with *shirk*, as it had not been before.”)

¹²² Q 17:45; 53:27; 79:10-11.

¹²³ Q 68:8; 69:49; 73:11.

¹²⁴ For instances of this phrase “in place of God” (*min dūn illāh*) in the context of the immediate audience of the Qur’an: Q 5:76, 7:197, 6:71, 25:55, 27:43, 29:17, 43:86, 45:10, 46:4, 71:25.

¹²⁵ Nicholai Sinai, *The Qur’an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 75, n. 55. (“It is...convenient to refer to them by using the Qur’anic term ‘Associators’, even if the relevant scriptural passages also employ other designations.”)

¹²⁶ Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṇām*, 5-6. *The Book of Idols*, 4.

¹²⁷ Q 6:74; 14:35; 21:57; 22:30; 26:71; 29:17, 25. For use of the term in the story of Moses; 7:138.

Anyone who honours the sacred ordinances of God will have good rewards from his Lord. Livestock have been made lawful to you, except for what has been explicitly forbidden. Shun the filth of idols (*al-rijs min al-awthān*) and shun false utterances. (Q 22:30)

The Qur'an could, of course, have used *aṣnām* and *awthān* to express the *shirk* in its milieu. Instead we find more ambiguous terms like *ṭāghūt*, seen eight times.¹²⁸ This term suggests false worship opposed to the worship of God, but its precise meaning is unclear in the Qur'an and contested in later tradition.¹²⁹ The same applies for the enigmatic term *al-jibt*, seen in one verse.¹³⁰ Most frequently, the Qur'an alludes to a range of unidentified 'associates' (*shurakā'*), 'gods' (*āliha*) and 'equals' (*andād*) taken for worship by the Prophet's opponents. The term for 'associate' (*sharīk*, *shurakā'*) is of course etymologically tied to *shirk*, derived from the root *sh-r-k*, but there seems no distinction between these terms. The Qur'an treats these as synonyms, all in the sense of a failure to exclusively worship God:

Ask them, 'Can any of your associates (*shurakā'*) originate creation, then bring it back to life again in the end, so how can you be misled? (Q 10:34)

They have taken other gods (*āliha*) besides God to help them, though these could not do so even if they called a whole army of them together! (Q 36:74-5)

They set up equals (*andād*) with God to lead people astray from His path. (Q 14:30)

These terms could be synonyms for idols, but the Qur'an is not clear. The Qur'an uses a range of generic titles to express and condemn *shirk* in its immediate environment, then, but we get no real description of the 'associates', 'gods' and 'equals' to which it refers. Their nature and identity remain elusive. Only rarely does the Qur'an move beyond general titles. One isolated passage explicitly names some of the features of the wider religious milieu:

Consider *al-Lāt* and *al-'Uzza*, and the third, other one, *Manāt* – are you to have the male and He the female? That, then, is an unjust division – these are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them. (Q 53:19-23)

Even here, the material is scarce. Later tradition identifies *al-Lāt*, *al-'Uzza* and *Manāt* as three of the major idols worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia.¹³¹ This is not clear in the Qur'an, which gives little detail as to the nature of these objects but does seem to suggest that these were names of angels worshipped as the "daughters" of God.¹³² This is a common theme. Several verses condemn the Prophet's opponents for attributing daughters to God.¹³³ Many verses suggest these "daughters" were equated with angels:

¹²⁸ Q 2:256, 257, 4:51, 60, 76, 5:65, 16:36, 39:17.

¹²⁹ See Jeffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, 202. ("(this is) a curious word...the commentators know nothing certain about it.") Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 55. ("it seems obvious that this is one of those words that the exegetical tradition does not really understand and which were the object of more or less plausible explanation.") Lane describes *ṭāghūt* as "anything which is worshipped to the exclusion of Allah" in his *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 4/1857. For a broader treatment of the various interpretations of the term see W. Atallah. 'Gibt et Taghut dans le Coran', *Arabica* XVII (1970); 69-82.

¹³⁰ Q 4:51. Ibn Manẓūr treats *jibt* as a synonym for 'idol': *Lisān al-'Arab*, 15/9. For similar debates in the exegetical tradition over its precise meaning see Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 56-7. For a political reading of these terms see H. Rahman. 'Jibt, taghut and the "tahkim" of the umma', *Arabica* 29 (1982); 50-59.

¹³¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 2-3. *The Book of Idols*, 4

¹³² Q 53:27. "Indeed, those who do not believe in the hereafter name the angels female names.")

¹³³ Q 16:57; 21:26; 37:149-153; 43:16-18; 53:21.

They assign daughters (*banāt*) to God – may He be exalted! – and the (sons) they desire to themselves. (Q 16:57)

They consider the angels – God’s servants – to be female (*ināthan*). (Q 43:19)

What? Has your Lord favoured you people with sons and taken daughters (*ināthan*) for Himself from the angels? What a monstrous thing for you to say! (Q 17:40)

In another verse the *jinn* are specified as the ‘associates’ of God.¹³⁴ In total, then, the Qur’an gives a complex account of what it means to ‘associate’ with God in its immediate milieu. Extending from idols to *jinn* to angel-worship, much of its discourse is highly elusive and includes enigmatic terms like *tāghūt* and *jibt*, while also referring to a range of unidentified ‘associates’, ‘gods’ and ‘equals’. It is tempting to clarify the picture by fusing all these epithets, viewing the ‘associates’, ‘gods’ and ‘equals’ as angels worshipped as ‘daughters’ of God.¹³⁵ Though possible, this is not self-evident from the text itself and it is no less likely that the range of appellations reveals a pluralistic environment, wherein the Qur’an perceives many different kinds of ‘association’. This could, in turn, suggest that the Prophet’s opponents were not a homogenous group but are subsumed, despite internal differences, under a collective banner of *mushrikūn*. This is conjecture, but it arises from the fact that the Qur’an offers no clear or fixed image of ‘association’ with God in its treatment of the *mushrikūn*.

The reason for this is clear. Allusion and ambiguity are common to Qur’anic discourse, as noted earlier, but in this context it serves a didactic purpose. The Qur’an is concerned not to present the names, features and identity of what is ‘associated’ with God by its opponents, but to deny outright the very idea and presence of *shirk* in the immediate milieu. While the ‘associates’ and ‘gods’ remain elusive, then, many verses in the Qur’an contrast the majesty and omnipotence of God with the powerlessness and inefficacy of whatever is ‘associated’ with Him. The tone here is derisive, even sarcastic:

You people, here is an illustration, so listen carefully: those you call on besides God could not, even if they all combined their forces, create a fly, and if the fly took something away from them, they would not be able to retrieve it. How feeble are the petitioners and how feeble are those they petition! (Q 22:73)

The Qur’an aims to condemn *shirk*, not define it. Implicit in this is a presumption that the Qur’an’s immediate audience is well familiar with the ‘gods’ and ‘associates’ that it critiques. But this also leaves us with a curious image of the *mushrikūn*. These are the major opponents of the Prophet, condemnations of which are a major theme in the Qur’an and comprise by some distance its largest reflection on *shirk*, yet we still get little insight into the nature of this group or the *shirk* of which they are accused. All we are left with is an image of opponents that are said to have in some sense ‘associated’ a range of diverse and allusive objects and beings with God. Beyond this, little is explicit.

¹³⁴ Q 6:100. (“They have attributed the jinn as associates to God – and God has created them.”)

¹³⁵ This is the approach of Sinai, *The Qur’an*, 68. (“All things considered, one does gather the impression that Muhammad’s pagan opponents themselves employed the concept of angels, and that they interchangeably spoke of gods, offspring or daughters of God, and angels.”) Also see Patricia Crone. ‘The Religion of the Qur’anic Pagans; God and the lesser deities’, *Arabica* 57:2 (2010), 156. Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 52.

The *mushrikūn* and belief in *Allāh*

Building on this, perhaps the most surprising and significant feature of the *mushrikūn* is their belief in the same God as the Prophet. The Qur'an shows the *mushrikūn* as major opponents but also attests to their close common ground with the Prophet. The *mushrikūn* also believed in God, or *Allāh*, and there is an awareness that both sides speak of the same God. We do not need to consult the works of pre-Islamic poetry to show this. Many Qur'anic verses reveal how *Allāh* was known to both sides:

If you ask them who created the heavens and earth and harnessed the sun and moon, they are sure to say; '*Allāh*'. Then why do they turn away from Him?...And if you ask them; 'Who sends water down from the sky and gives life with it to the earth after it has died?' they are sure to say, '*Allāh*'. (Q 29:61-3)

Pre-Islamic poetry attests to the significance of *Allāh* in the religious life of pre-Islamic Hijāz.¹³⁶ The *mushrikūn* thus affirm *Allāh* to be creator of heaven and earth, providing all sustenance through rain.¹³⁷ In other verses they swear oaths by Him.¹³⁸ In these respects this group are firmly in line with some of the essential teachings of the Prophet. Other verses imply *Allāh* was a supreme god for the *mushrikūn*, standing above what they otherwise 'associated' with Him. In this vein the *mushrikūn* are quoted as defending their practices by invoking the concept of intercession (*shafā'a*):

They worship in place of God things that can neither harm nor benefit them, and say; 'these are our intercessors with God.' Say, 'Do you think you can tell God about something He knows not to exist in the heavens or earth? Exalted is He! He is far above what they associate with Him! ('*ammā yushrikūn*) (Q 10:18). .¹³⁹

This raises the question of whether the Qur'an condemns the *mushrikūn* because they worship the wrong objects, their 'associates', 'gods' and 'equals', or because they perform the wrong worship of God, a worship by way of these objects?¹⁴⁰ The Qur'an is unclear. But we can assume the intercession sought by the *mushrikūn* was this-worldly, given their denial, elsewhere, of the Hereafter and resurrection.¹⁴¹ Most responses to this deny the power of all 'associates' to intercede, without the permission of God.¹⁴² Elsewhere, again implying the superiority of *Allāh*, the *mushrikūn* express and defend their *shirk* in strongly determinist terms:

Those who associate with God (*alladhīna ashrakū*) say; 'If God had willed, we would not have associated with the Him (*mā ashraknā*) - nor would our fathers - or have declared anything forbidden (Q 6:148).¹⁴³

¹³⁶ For the most extensive overview of the relevant sources see Najmah Sayuti, *The Concept of Allāh as the Highest God in Pre-Islamic Arabia: A Study of Pre-Islamic Religious Poetry* (Unpublished MA Thesis, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 2000).

¹³⁷ For more verses on this theme see Q 31:25; 43:9; 23:84-88; 35:40-2; 26:38-40.

¹³⁸ On swearing oaths Q 6:109; 35:42; 6:63-4; 10:22-3; 29:65.

¹³⁹ Q 39:3-4; 43:86; 6:94.

¹⁴⁰ In wider monotheist tradition we find the same tension in Jewish thought. See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3. ("the golden calf (is)... the epitome of idolatry in the Bible. (But) was the sin of the golden calf a sin because it constituted worship of the wrong object...or because...it constituted a wrong method of worship, a worship of God by means of the calf?")

¹⁴¹ Q 17:45; 53:27; 79:10-11.

¹⁴² Q 7:53; 36:23; 43:86; 39:43; 78:37; 34:22; 19:87; 21:26; 53:26; 43:86.

¹⁴³ Q 16:35; 43:20; 36:47.

This verse is significant for the *mushrikūn* here conceive and express their practices in the same terms as the Prophet: the language of *shirk* was shared, it seems, by both sides. Patricia Crone also notes this is a clever argument for it invokes the essence of the Prophet’s message – that God is all-powerful – against him.¹⁴⁴ Indeed the Qur’an often explains *shirk* in similarly determinist ways: God guides who he wills; He has put a veil on their hearts; if God willed, unbelievers would believe.¹⁴⁵ It is noteworthy that in another verse the Qur’an says precisely the same as the *mushrikūn*:

If it had been God’s will, they would not have associated with Him. (*wa-law shā’ Allāh mā ashrakū*), but We have not made you their guardian, nor are you their keeper. (Q 6:107)¹⁴⁶

The same argument is used by both sides, then, but for different ends. The *mushrikūn* cite this to defend and sanction their *shirk*. The Qur’an cites this to stress God’s all-encompassing power. But perhaps the most striking feature of the Qur’anic *mushrikūn* is their tendency to worship God alone. It seems that the *mushrikūn* had the capacity to renounce their ‘associates’. At times of danger or distress they would turn exclusively to *Allāh*, abandoning what they otherwise worshipped with Him;

Whenever they go on board a ship they call on God, sincerely to Him alone, but once He has delivered them safely back to the land, they associate with Him (*yushrikūn*). (Q 29:65)

When something bad happens to people, they cry to their Lord and turn to Him for help, but no sooner does He let them taste His blessing than – lo and behold! – some of the associate others with their Lord (*bi-rabbhim yushrikūn*) (Q 30:33)¹⁴⁷

The Prophet’s main opponents, then, are presented as not entirely committed to *shirk*. From the Qur’anic perspective, the real problem of the *mushrikūn* is perhaps less their *shirk* than their inconsistency – this group are only “temporary monotheists”.¹⁴⁸ They display a readiness to worship God alone but, equally, a tendency to return to *shirk* by embracing the very ‘associates’ that in more thoughtful moments they seem to recognise as futile. This underpins the Qur’anic critique:

Say, ‘Who owns the earth and all who live in it, if you know?’ and they will reply, ‘*Allāh*’. Say, ‘Will you not take heed?’ Say, ‘Who is the Lord of the seven heavens? Who is the Lord of the Mighty Throne?’ and they will reply, ‘*Allāh*’. Say, ‘will you not be mindful?’ Say, ‘Who controls everything in His hand? Who protects, while there is not protection against Him, if you know?’ and they will reply, ‘*Allāh*’. Say, ‘Then how can you be so deluded?’ (Q 23:84-90).

The *mushrikūn* must be “deluded” (*tusharūn*). Only in this way can the Qur’an understand the group. Thus, the Qur’an ultimately condemns the *mushrikūn* not because they are a group so far removed from the Prophet, but for the opposite. The Qur’an struggles with a group of opponents that believe in God, share many correct beliefs of Him and even worship Him sincerely, but return to *shirk* and continue to reject the Prophet. Put simply, the gap between the message of *tawhīd* of the Prophet and the *shirk* of

¹⁴⁴ Crone. ‘The Religion of the Qur’anic Pagans’, 159.

¹⁴⁵ For such verses see Q 6:25, 35, 39, 111; 13:31; 17:46; 18:57; 36:8.

¹⁴⁶ Q 6:112, 137, 149.

¹⁴⁷ For other similar passages see Q 60:40-41; 17:67; 31:32; 39:8; 63-4; 7:189-90; 10:22-23; 31:32.

¹⁴⁸ Toshiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran; Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo; The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1966), 102. (“it is indeed remarkable that...the pagan Arabs used to have recourse to ‘temporary monotheism’ apparently without reflection on the grave implication of such an act.”)

his opponents is not large at all. The crux of the Qur’anic critique, it seems, is that there should be any gap at all when these opponents are already so close to the true understanding of God.

The quest for the identity of the *mushrikūn*

The *mushrikūn* are an intriguing category. Major opponents and ‘unbelievers’, this group defend their practices by invoking the all-determining power of God. While this comprises its major reflection on *shirk*, the Qur’an gives little insight into the identity of this group and the nature of their *shirk*. We do not know if this is a homogenous category of opponents, or if the Qur’an uses ‘*mushrikūn*’ as a collective banner. And the stand-out feature is that they appear so close to the Prophet and the Qur’anic conception of God. Toshiko Izutsu neatly captures the Qur’anic perspective:

The concept of Allah that was prevalent among the pre-Islamic Arabs on the eve of the Islamic era was, in general, surprisingly close in nature to the Islamic one, so close, indeed, that the Koran even wonders why such a right understanding of God does not finally lead the disbelievers to acknowledging the truth of the new teaching.¹⁴⁹

Scholars have been drawn to the Qur’anic account of this group to understand the nature of their beliefs and what this reveals of the religious milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia. Often part of a broader question that explores the origins and influences of the Qur’an in late antiquity, it is known that a sparsity of historical sources means our understanding of the *mushrikūn* is heavily mediated by the Qur’an itself and later tradition.¹⁵⁰ But the literature for what is called “the quest for Arabian paganism” is extensive.¹⁵¹ A full overview of the literature lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is worth illustrating some key trends. There appear several ways of construing the Qur’anic *mushrikūn*

A common argument in scholarship, found in the work of William Montgomery-Watt (d. 2006), is to construe the *mushrikūn* in the Qur’an as henotheistic. For Watt, it is clear from the Qur’an that the pre-Islamic Arabs believed in a supreme god, named *Allāh*, among a constellation of minor deities.¹⁵² Watt supports this by drawing on wider scholarship which, he writes, demonstrates that a belief in a supreme God was a common feature of religions in late antiquity.¹⁵³ Watt writes:

When the Qur’anic material is considered in conjunction with this evidence for a widespread belief in a higher of supreme god, it becomes virtually certain that among thinking people in Mecca when

¹⁴⁹ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 101.

¹⁵⁰ Sinai argues our attempt a fuller picture of this category is “bound to remain blurred”. Sinai, *The Qur’an*, 66.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 59-72. F.E. Peters, ed. *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999). Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers; At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). Patricia Crone. ‘Angels versus Humans as Messengers of God’; the view of the Qur’anic pagans’, in Phillipa Townsend and Moulie Vidas, eds. *Revelation, Literature and Community in Late Antiquity* (Tubingen; Mohr Siebeck, 2001): 315-36; ‘The Qur’anic Mushrikun and the Resurrection (Part I)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75 (2012); 445-72. Alfred Welch. ‘Allah and other supernatural beings; the emergence of the Qur’an doctrine of tawhid’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47 (1980b); 733-58. Pavel Pavlovitch. ‘On the Problem of the Pre-Islamic Lord of the Kaba’, *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 2 (1998); 49-79. H. Gibb. ‘Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabian’, *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962); 269-80.

¹⁵² W.M. Watt. ‘The Qur’an Belief in a ‘High-God’ in Pre-Islamic Mecca’, *Journal of Semitic Studies* XVI:A (1979); 205-11; ‘Belief in a “high god” in pre-Islamic Mecca, in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971); 35-40. Uri Rubin. ‘Al-Šamad and the High God’, *Der Islam* 61:1 (1984), 199; W. R. Arafat. ‘Fact and Fiction in the History of Pre-Islamic Idol Worship’, *Islamic Quarterly* 12 (1969), 19.

¹⁵³ The work Watt cites is Javier Taixidor *The Pagan God: Popular Religion in the Greco-Roman Near East* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1977). See W.M. Watt. ‘The Qur’an and belief in a “High God”, 205-6.

Muhammad began receiving revelation the dominant religious outlook was this belief in a high or supreme God, who is called Allah. For the modern student of Islam this has the corollary that the Qur'anic message is to be understood as having been addressed to a people with such a belief.¹⁵⁴

Against the Prophet's stress on the oneness and absolute divinity of God, the *mushrikūn* are seen to have a graded conception of the divine, viewing *Allāh* as a 'high God' amongst a spectrum of deities. For Watt, then, the basic sense of *shirk* in this reflection is this late antique form of henotheism. Against this, Gerald Hawting (b. 1944) offers a very different account of the Qur'anic *mushrikūn*. Hawting is part of a revisionist trend of historical scholarship that challenges the traditional accounts of the origins of the Qur'an, situating the Qur'an outside the seventh century Hijāz and in an intra-monotheist, sectarian milieu.¹⁵⁵ As part of this project, Hawting argues the Qur'anic verses on the *mushrikūn* should be read in light of their polemical spirit. Noting the common ground between the *mushrikūn* and the Prophet, and drawing on accusations of 'idolatry' in intra-monotheist polemics, such as Protestant condemnations of Catholic 'idolatry', he insists that the Qur'anic account of the *mushrikūn* be read in the same vein. The Qur'an, he writes, clearly reveals a group of opponents that would have considered itself monotheist:

The verses of the Koran...do not point to a group that worshipped a multiplicity of gods and bowed down before idols, but rather to a group that shared some basic concepts of monotheism (God as creator, angels, perhaps the Last Judgment, intercession, etc) but held views that the Koran equated with, and presented – surely polemically – as polytheism and idolatry.¹⁵⁶

The *mushrikūn* are conceived as a rival group of monotheists that the Qur'an polemically derides as *mushrikūn* on account of intra-monotheist doctrinal difference. Hawting thus entirely rejects the image of Muslim historical tradition that the Prophet's opponents were literal idolaters. This, he argues, has too large a discrepancy with the Qur'an's depiction of the group:

If we had only the Koran, would we deduce that the polemic against the *mushrikūn* must be directed at Arab polytheists and idolaters? I think not.¹⁵⁷

To the extent that anything outside the Qur'an can help us understand the attack on *shirk*, it is likely to be other monotheist polemic against groups perceived as falling short in their monotheism, rather than the 'historical' recreation of Arabian idolatry in Muslim tradition.¹⁵⁸

Much of this is taken up by Patricia Crone (d. 2015), who also stresses the need to read the Qur'an in isolation of later tradition.¹⁵⁹ The Qur'an itself, she notes, is entirely silent on many of the key features said to characterise pre-Islamic Mecca in later tradition; a *ka'ba* housing idols, the Prophet destroying

¹⁵⁴ W.M. Watt. 'The Qur'an and belief in a "High God"', 206.

¹⁵⁵ For an overview of these approaches, Fred M. Donner. 'The Qur'an in recent scholarship', in Gabriel Reynolds, ed. *The Qur'an in its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2008); 29-50.

¹⁵⁶ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 54.

¹⁵⁷ Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵⁹ Patricia Crone. 'The Religion of the Qur'anic Pagans', 152. ("the Islamic tradition is excluded...on the principle that we have to start by understanding the Qur'an on the basis of information provided by the book itself, as opposed to that of later readers, and to understand this information in light of developments known to have preceded its formation rather than those engendered by the book itself."). Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Crone. 'How Did the Quranic Pagans Make a Living?', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68 (2005); 387-399.

these idols, every house in Mecca possessing its idol.¹⁶⁰ It also reveals a group of opponents that are well versed in Christian ideas like intercession.¹⁶¹ Noting that references to literal idols (*aṣnām*, *awthān*) occur almost always in stories of earlier prophets like Abraham, Crone argues that the idols the Prophet faced were only conceptual:

The fact it is only in the Biblical stories that physical idols are mentioned suggests that those of the Messenger's own time were conceptual. What he is targeting is a falsehood (*ifk*), something untrue fathered by the pagans on God; he sees himself smashing idols in the sense of eradicating wrong *beliefs*. His pagan opponents worshipped the same God as he did, but they had views incompatible with the unity of God as he saw it. Their idols have no more to do with pagan idolatry in the literal sense than they do in the writings of Luther, or for that matter in modern Iran.¹⁶²

Crone argues, tentatively, that the group known as the *mushrikūn* were likely a Jewish or Christian sect taken to saint and angel worship and, on this basis, are accused of *shirk* in the Qur'an.¹⁶³

Hawting and Crone stress the polemical nature of the Qur'anic material and, from this, assess how this impacts our reading of its verses. Yet we may question, briefly, to what extent the Qur'an could or should be read in isolation of later Muslim tradition. As a semantically complex and often obscure text, much of our understanding of the Qur'an relies on lexical dictionaries provided by the tradition, as even Crone concedes.¹⁶⁴ The blanket rejection of later Muslim tradition also raises issues. It could be argued that the literary evidence of the tradition relating to pre-Islamic idolatry is too great to be dismissed outright. As Michael Lecker writes:

Nobody in his right mind would assume that so many tribal informants could plot together to invent idols which had not existed. The legendary elements in the conversion stories of pagan Arabs can be rejected, but the factual debates about idols remains intact...unless they were Jews or Christians, conversion to Islam meant renouncing idolatry.¹⁶⁵

That the *mushrikūn* consider themselves monotheist does not necessarily exclude the presence of an outward form of worship involving wooden and stone objects. G.W. Bowersock refutes Crone's claims of conceptual idolatry in Mecca as "minimalist beyond plausibility", given archaeological findings.¹⁶⁶ Lastly, Hawting and Crone seem to overlook the many ways the Qur'an engages the pagan religious and cultural milieu of Arabia. The idea of 'daughters of God', for example, is well attested in epigraphic evidence in South Arabia.¹⁶⁷ Similar evidence shows the wider veneration of *al-Lāt* in Arabia.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Patricia Crone. 'The Religion of the Qur'anic Pagans', 169.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 168.

¹⁶² Ibid., 172. (italics in original).

¹⁶³ Ibid., 192-200.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 172.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Lecker. *Was Arabian Idol Worship declining on the Eve of Islam?* (Transcription of lecture delivered at Yad Ben Zvi, Jerusalem, 1999), 23-4; *People, Tribes and Society in Arabia around the time of Muḥammad* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), chapter III.

¹⁶⁶ G.W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127. ("Such a reading would make little sense for an Arabian culture that archaeology has shown to have displayed idols publicly throughout the later phases of the pre-Islamic age...to deny that they were tangible objects, in a world where idols could be seen in temples and on the ground, is minimalist beyond plausibility.")

¹⁶⁷ Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 68. Hoyland, 'Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion', 1071.

¹⁶⁸ Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 61.

Allusions to animal sacrifice in the Qur'an also suggest a pagan, not Biblical milieu.¹⁶⁹ Sinai reconciles this by defining the religion of the *mushrikūn* as "Pagan-Biblical syncretism".¹⁷⁰ Drawing on a growing argument among historians that pre-Islamic Arabian Hijāz was already part of the wider world of late antiquity, a milieu exposed to outside religious influences, the *mushrikūn* are said to have fused pagan traditions with Biblical ideas. Sinai speaks of the need

to understand the Associators as pagans who had grafted on to their religious heritage assorted Judaeo-Christian elements, such as the figure of a creator God...the notion of intercession, and the concept of angels...It stands to reason, then, that the Qur'anic Associators worshipped ancient Arabian deities yet felt free to reinterpret and supplement their ancestral rites by concepts and ideas adopted from the Jewish and Christian traditions that were increasingly seeping into the Arabian interior.¹⁷¹

The incorporation of Jewish and Christian elements into indigenous pagan tradition was, again, a feature of late antiquity.¹⁷² We perhaps see signs of this syncretism in later Muslim tradition: in some reports, upon the conquest of Mecca the Prophet cleansed the *ka'ba* of idols but preserved an image of Jesus and Mary found therein.¹⁷³ This fusion of pagan and Biblical tradition, then, where a belief in a creator God, angels and intercession is fused with pagan concepts, offers another way of profiling the identity of the *mushrikūn*, condemnations of which comprise the Qur'an's major reflection on *shirk*.

The social and ethical dimensions of Qur'anic *shirk*

This foregoing analysis overlooks, however, that the Qur'an not only conceives the *mushrikūn* on doctrinal terms. Rather, they are depicted as a real category of opponents, living and interacting with the Prophet. This final section explores this and briefly addresses the social and ethical dimensions of *shirk*. At the outset, the Qur'an presumes an indivisible link that connects the correct belief in God with an ethic of social justice and personal morality. Affirming the doctrinal truth of God's oneness is part of a broader spectrum that encompasses a range of ethical virtues and moral practices. The believers (*al-mu'minūn*) in the Qur'an, for example, are defined not just by a belief in God and the Prophet but equally by a range of virtues that include giving charity, feeding the poor and caring for the needy.¹⁷⁴ Believers do not commit adultery.¹⁷⁵ They avoid gossip, backbiting and are true to their promises.¹⁷⁶ In

¹⁶⁹ Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 61. On this point also see Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and His People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1, 40 and 263. For allusions to animal sacrifice see Q 2:196; 5:2, 95; 22:32-33; 48:25; 108:2.

¹⁷⁰ Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 69.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 69-70. For a detailed overview of the claim that pre-Islamic Arabia was already part of the world of late antiquity, see Hoyland, 'Early Islam as a Late Antique Religion', *passim*.

¹⁷² Peter Brown has described pagans of late antiquity as "(h)ackers of the supernatural" who were "quite prepared to 'cannibalise' Christian belief and practice, in order to find spare parts with which to enrich their own religious system." Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 88. David Frankfurter, 'Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003), 345. Cf. Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 77, n. 87-88.

¹⁷³ Uri Rubin, 'Ḥanīfiyya and Ka'ba: An Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 13 (1990), 102.

¹⁷⁴ Q 2:83, 110, 177, 215, 263-4, 270-78; 4:77, 114, 162; 5:12, 45, 55; 7:156; 21:70; 22: 41.

¹⁷⁵ Q 17:32; 25:68-76; 70:29.

¹⁷⁶ Q 70:32-33.

some verses the Qur'an intersperses these socio-ethical virtues with ritual acts like praying, giving a clear impression that these are two sides of one coin:

The servants of the Most Merciful are those who walk humbly on the earth, and who, when ignorant people address them, reply, with words of peace; those who spent their nights prostrating and standing, worshipping their Lord; who plead, 'Our Lord, turn away from us the suffering of Hell: its suffering goes on and on. It is an evil home, a foul resting place!' They are those who are neither wasteful nor niggardly when they spend, but keep to a just balance; those who never invoke anything besides God, nor take a like, which God has made sacred, except in the pursuit of justice, nor commit adultery. (Q 26:63-8).

The longest verse in the Qur'an refers not to the nature of God or the prophets, but to the importance of repaying debts.¹⁷⁷ The command for believers to 'enjoin the good and forbid the bad' is a common refrain.¹⁷⁸ The image of the 'believer' in the Qur'an is thus richer than one who confesses God's oneness and the prophecy of Muhammad. It is tied to notions of social justice and personal morality. Rooted in the metaphysical, it spreads to the social and ethical realm. Fazlur Rahman neatly captures this:

Muhammad's monotheism was, from the beginning, linked up with a humanism and a sense of social and economic justice whose intensity is no less than the intensity of the monotheistic idea... whoever carefully reads the revelations of the Prophet cannot escape the conclusion that the two must be regarded as expressions of the same experience... The Prophet seems to insist: one God – one humanity.¹⁷⁹

The same applies, conversely, for *shirk*. The Qur'an places *shirk* at the center of a constellation of moral and social failings. Again, the Qur'an implies a spectrum wherein false conceptions of God are seen to inevitably extend into moral and social corruption. Many verses in the Qur'an define the *mushrikūn* primarily in terms of their negative traits: they are stubborn and arrogant.¹⁸⁰ They are liars (*kādhībūn*).¹⁸¹ They dismiss the Qur'an as mere myths (*asāīr*).¹⁸² The *mushrikūn* both reject the message and mock the messenger, deriding the Prophet as a poet (*shā'ir*), magician (*sāḥir*) and soothsayer (*kāhin*).¹⁸³

Whenever it was said to them, 'there is no god but God', they became arrogant, and said; 'are we to forsake our gods for a mad poet? (Q 37:35-6).

The unbelievers (*alladhīna kafarū*) think it strange that a prophet of their own people has come to warn them; they say, 'He is just a lying sorcerer. How can he claim that all the gods are but one God? What an astonishing thing!' Their leaders depart, saying, 'Walk away, stay faithful to you gods!' (Q 38:4-6)

This is not unique to Muhammad. The rejection of the prophets is a repeated theme.¹⁸⁴ The image of the society of the *mushrikūn* is also defined by a range of immoral customs and practices. Greed, the accumulation of wealth and the neglect of the poor are major themes. It is striking that many Qur'anic verses, particularly those traditionally ascribed to its earliest Meccan phase, target not the beliefs of the *mushrikūn* but instead these unjust social customs and inequalities:

¹⁷⁷ Q 2:282.

¹⁷⁸ Q 3:104, 110; 7:157; 9:71, 112; 22:41.

¹⁷⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 38.

¹⁸⁰ Q 71:7; 74:16; 80:5.

¹⁸¹ Q 37:152.

¹⁸² Q 6:25; 25:5

¹⁸³ On poet: Q 36:69; 21:5; 37:36; 52:30; 69:41. Magician: Q 38:4-5; 25:8; 44:13-4. Soothsayer: Q 55:29; 69:42.

¹⁸⁴ Q 3:184; 22:42; 34:45; 35:4.

No indeed! You do not honour orphans, you do not urge one another to feed the poor, you consume inheritance greedily, and you love wealth with a passion. (Q 89:17-20).

Woe to those who give short measure, who demand of other people full measure for themselves, but when it is they who weigh or measure for others give less than they should. Do these people not realise that they will be raised up, on a mighty Day? (Q 83:4)

Verses alluding to the ‘love of wealth’ in pre-Islamic Arabia resonate in later tradition. The hadith, *sīra* and works of early Islamic history stress the pre-Islamic function of the *ka’ba* as a sanctuary of regional importance, hosting to a range of idols. Pre-Islamic Mecca is depicted in the tradition as a city whose wealth depended on its status as a pilgrimage center of idolatry.¹⁸⁵ Another social custom condemned in the Qur’an is female infanticide.¹⁸⁶ In places the Qur’an attacks this custom in conjunction with the beliefs of the *mushrikūn*, pointing to the perceived absurdity of ascribing daughters to God, noted earlier, while they prefer the birth of sons.

When one of them is given news of the birth of a daughter, such as he so readily ascribes to the Lord of Mercy, his face grows dark and he is filled with gloom. (Q 43:17)

When one of them is given news of the birth of a baby girl, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. In his shame he hides from himself away from his people because of the bad news he has been given. Should keep her or suffer contempt to bury her in the dust? How ill they judge!..They attribute to God what they themselves dislike while their own tongues utter the lie that the best (sons) belong to them. (Q 16:58-62)

Shirk is not just condemned in a doctrinal sense, then, but it has tangible manifestations in wider society. It is tied to notions of greed, injustice, oppression, arrogance and even the persecution of prophets. ‘Association’ with God pervades all facets of existence. Again, Fazlur Rahman aptly notes this Qur’anic link between doctrine and ethics, *shirk* and injustice:

The Qur’an began by criticising two closely related aspects of that (pre-Islamic Arabian) society; the polytheism or the multiplicity of gods...and the gross socio-economic disparities that equally rested on and perpetuated a pernicious divisiveness of mankind. The two are obverse and converse of the same coin.¹⁸⁷

Whether *shirk* in doctrine is a cause or symptom of injustice and moral corruption misses the point. The Qur’an seems to insist that one cannot be separated from the other. These are different facets of the same, essential phenomena. There is, in short, no room for a moral *mushrik* in the Qur’an.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the condemnation of *shirk* lies at the heart of the monotheistic message of the Qur’an. This is one of the main ways the Qur’an expresses the oneness of God and calls for the worship of God alone. *Shirk* is held as the gravest doctrinal error whereby the entire message of the Qur’an can be summarised as a warning against *shirk*. For this reason it is perhaps unsurprising that the Qur’an ties *shirk* to a host

¹⁸⁵ A good overview of this is provided in Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: Apostle of Allah*, ed. Michael Edwards (London: The Folio Society, 1964), 40-45. Also Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 5-7. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 21, 24-25 and 93-4.

¹⁸⁶ Q 81:8-9; 16:58-60.

¹⁸⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), 12.

of unjust traits and practices. Only in this way can it understand why the axiomatic truth of *tawhīd*, a truth evidenced in the natural world, relayed by the prophets and embedded in our innate conscience or *fiṭra*, is rejected. In short, the Qur’anic condemnation of *shirk* is absolute:

God does not forgive that anything is associated with Him (*yushraka bihi*); anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who associates with God has fabricated a tremendous sin. (Q 4:48, 116).

From this angle, the Qur’an’s material on *shirk* is clear. But from another perspective, *shirk* emerges as a complex and multifaceted category. The Qur’an speaks of many kinds of *shirk* and gives no fixed image or understanding of what it means to ‘associate’ with God. The elusive, ambiguous and even argumentative nature of its discourse raises questions over how to interpret its verses, but the sense remains of a multi-faceted concept operating on various levels. The idea of ‘association’ with God implicit in *shirk* includes the worship of the self, heavenly bodies and idols to Christian beliefs of Jesus and Mary. Addressing its opponents, the Qur’an paints a complex account of *shirk* that gives no clear sense of the nature of the ‘association’ that it condemns. More deeply, the Qur’anic material on *shirk* traverses a spectrum that ranges from the failure to recognise the one true God, as in the idolaters of Abraham, to a belief in God but a failure to worship Him correctly, as in Christian beliefs of Jesus and the beliefs of the *mushrikūn*. It ranges from rejecting the authority of prophets like Abraham and Muhammad, to exaggerated beliefs of the prophets like Jesus, placing him on the level of divinity. It covers literal idol worship, traditionally the antithesis of monotheism, to a group of opponents of the Prophet that appear ‘surprisingly close’ to the Qur’anic conception of God.

This lies at the crux of the present study; while the concept of *shirk* is central to how the Qur’an speaks of divine oneness, it is also a multi-layered category. Though inclusive of idol worship, it is not reduced or essentialised to such. The worship of idols is one subset of *shirk*, but the idea of ‘associating’ with God in the Qur’an extends much further. It is perhaps this very breadth and flexibility intrinsic in the idea of ‘association’ that makes the condemnation of *shirk* so central to the Qur’an. For our purposes, that the Qur’an has many ways of speaking of *shirk* would seem to open the idea of ‘association’ to diverse interpretations in later Islamic thought. If we find diverse conceptions of *shirk* in later Islamic intellectual tradition, as shown in the following chapters, it is possible to trace this back to the Qur’an itself, a close reading of which reveals a range of reflections of what it means to ‘associate’ with God. But there is perhaps another, final reason why the condemnation of *shirk* is the critical stress-point of the Qur’an. This relates to the fact the Qur’an affirms Muhammad as ‘seal of the prophets’, the last in a line of prophets sent to mankind throughout history.¹⁸⁸ Jane McAuliffe describes how this sense of finality underpins much of the homiletic and exhortatory character of the Qur’an:

Among its strong self-declaratives are the Qur’an’s assertions of its overriding pre-eminence, its utter finality. With this revelation, God has completed his salvific sequencing of prophets and messengers.

¹⁸⁸ Q 33:40.

The words spoken to Muḥammad, the ‘seal of the prophets’, constitute God’s full and final guidance for humankind.¹⁸⁹

While a grave doctrinal error, the Qur’an also presents *shirk* as deeply-rooted in human history. It has been condemned by all the prophets. It seems that mankind has always been guilty or in need of warning against the error of ‘associating’ with God. Yet as ‘seal of the prophets’ there will be no prophets sent to guide humanity after Muhammad. The Qur’an, then, is the final warning to humankind against *shirk*. This is our last chance.

¹⁸⁹ Jane D. McAuliffe. ‘Introduction’, in ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

Chapter II: Reflections on *shirk* in early Muslim tradition

To deny idols, or still better to destroy them, is like translating into concrete terms the fundamental expression of Islam, the formula *lā ilāha illā 'llāh*.¹⁹⁰

This chapter moves from the Qur'an to explore reflections on *shirk* in the early Muslim tradition. By 'early Muslim tradition', we refer to the extra-Qur'anic sources that emerged from the eighth to tenth centuries C.E and which purport to enhance our understanding of the life of the Prophet and Arabia at the advent of Islam. This includes the hadith collections and works on the life of the Prophet (*sīra*), but it focuses on the histories of pre and early Islamic Arabia, particularly the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (Book of Idols) of Ḥishām Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 819). This chapter takes the work of Ibn al-Kalbī as broadly representative of the tradition as a whole, but also draws on the histories of al-Azraqī, al-Wāqīdī (d. 823) and Ibn Sa'd (d. 845).¹⁹¹ What follows is not an exhaustive account of all the allusions to *shirk* in these sources, which lies beyond the scope of one chapter, but an attempt to draw out certain key themes that illustrate the nature and meaning of *shirk* in the early Muslim tradition.

This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it reveals the difference between reflections on *shirk* in the works of hadith, *sīra*, and Ibn al-Kalbī to that found in the Qur'an. As seen previously, the Qur'an offers a complex account of *shirk* in its immediate milieu and alludes to the worship of unidentified 'associates', 'gods', angels, *jinn* and the *ṭāghūt*. The exact identity of the *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an, or the nature of their *shirk*, is not explicit. The *mushrikūn* also appear very close to the Prophet on some core doctrinal issues. But a very different image emerges in the sources of early Muslim tradition. Here, *shirk* at the time of the Prophet is readily conflated with idol worship. Opponents known as the *mushrikūn* are depicted as idolaters in a literal sense, worshipping idols of wood and stone. Early writers like Ibn al-Kalbī quite self-consciously seek to clarify ambiguities in the Qur'anic account and read an image of idols into its verses on *shirk*. He gives the following interpretive gloss;

When God sent His prophet, who came peaching the doctrine of *tawḥīd* and calling for worship of Him alone, without any associate (*sharīk*), (the Arab opponents) said; 'Has he made all the gods one God? Indeed, this is a curious thing!' (Q 39:4). They had in mind in this verse the idols.¹⁹²

Ibn al-Kalbī provides a wealth of information on the nature of idolatry that is entirely absent from the Qur'an, including the names, sites, features and tribal affiliations of pre-Islamic idols. In total, the *Kitāb*

¹⁹⁰ Titus Burckhardt, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* (London: World of Islam Festival, 1976), 5.

¹⁹¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, Abū al-Mundhir. *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li al-ṭibā'a wa al-nashr, 1964). Nabih Amin Faris, trans. *The Book of Idols: Being a translation from the Arabic of the Kitāb al-Aṣnām* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952). Al-Azraqī, Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad. *Akhbār Makka wa-mā jā'a fihā min al-athār*, ed. Rushdī al-Ṣāliḥ Malhas, 2 volumes (Mecca: Matābi' Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1978). Al-Wāqīdī, Muḥammad ibn 'Umar. *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. M. Jones (Cairo, 1959-66). Ibn Sa'd, Muḥammad. *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-Kubra*, ed. E. Mittwoch and E. Sachau, 9 volumes (Leiden: E J Brill, 1905-1921). Taking Ibn al-Kalbī as representative of the tradition is adopted by Gerald Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: from Polemic to History* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, 1999).

¹⁹² Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 33. *The Book of Idols*, 28.

al-Aṣṅnām provides biographical details of some twenty-five idols. It augments our image of *Manāt*, for example, briefly referenced in the Qur'an (Q 53:20):

The most ancient of all the idols was *Manāt*. The Arabs used to name (their children) 'Abd-*Manāt* or *Zayd-Manāt*. *Manāt* was erected on the seashore in the vicinity of al-Mushallal in Qudayd, between Medina and Mecca. All the Arabs used to venerate her and sacrifice to her...(indeed) at the end of the pilgrimage...when they (the Arabs) were about to return home, they would set out to the place where *Manāt* stood, shave their heads, and stay there a while. They did not consider the pilgrimage completed until they visited *Manāt*.¹⁹³

We find similarly vivid accounts of pre-Islamic idols not mentioned in the Qur'an, with names such as *dhū-l-Khalāsa* and *Hubāl*.¹⁹⁴ The early tradition also contains aspects missing from the Qur'an like the prohibition of images, found across numerous hadith narrations. This is in turn related to the second key theme of this chapter. The clear equation of Qur'anic *shirk* with idol worship at the time of the Prophet reveals how early historians like Ibn al-Kalbī did not conceive of *shirk* as just a metaphysical or doctrinal error. Rather, *shirk* had tangible manifestations in the social sphere. The second half of this chapter explores this in more detail, examining the many reports of idol destruction that are said to have accompanied the spread of Islam. These accounts reveal the sense of rootedness and attachment to idolatry in pre and early Islamic society, with reports even highlighting the struggle of newly-converted tribes to fully renounce idols after embracing Islam. Even at the time of the Prophet, then, *shirk* is not conceived in abstract doctrinal terms. 'Associating' with God had a practical, social dimension. Declaring *tawḥīd* entailed the removal of idols and the active reshaping of the social space.

Questions of historical criticism are not the concern of this chapter. Nor does this chapter explore any archaeological evidence of pre-Islamic idolatry.¹⁹⁵ We may briefly note that as Muslim historians writing a century or more after the Prophet, in an Islamised milieu of the eighth and ninth century, we have reason to doubt the veracity of at least some of the material found in Ibn al-Kalbī and others. As Nicolai Sinai and Gerald Hawting note, the *Kitāb al-Aṣṅnām* is not consistent on much basic information relating to idols: it contains different locations for the same idol, conflicting definitions of *ṣanam* and

¹⁹³ Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅnām*, 13. *The Book of Idols*, 12-13. See the description of another idol not found in the Qur'an but in the hadiths, named *dhū-l-Khalāsa*. Ibn al-Kalbī tells us; "it was a carved piece of white quartz with something in the form of a crown upon its head. It stood in Tabāla, between Mecca and San'ā, a distance of seven nights journey from Mecca." Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅnām*, 34-5. *The Book of Idols*, 29-30.

¹⁹⁴ Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅnām*, 27-8. *The Book of Idols*, 23. ("The Quraysh had also several idols in and around the Ka'ba. The greatest of these was Hubal. It was, as I was told, of red agate, in the form of a man with the right hand broken off. It came into the possession of the Quraysh in this condition, and they made for it a hand of gold.") On the idol named *dhū-l-Khalāsa*. Ibn al-Kalbī tells us; "it was a carved piece of white quartz with something in the form of a crown upon its head. It stood in Tabāla, between Mecca and San'ā, a distance of seven nights journey from Mecca." Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅnām*, 33. *The Book of Idols*, 29-30 The historian Michael Lecker gleans from the rich corpus of early Muslim literature a social system or hierarchy of idols; each family had a personal idol in their home, above this was an idol of the nobleman (*raḡul sharīf*), and above this a chief idol of the whole clan or tribe. See Michael Lecker. *Was Arabian Idol Worship declining on the Eve of Islam?* (Transcription of lecture delivered at Yad Ben Zvi, Jerusalem, 1999), 35; *People, Tribes and Society in Arabia around the time of Muḥammad* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), chapter III. *Idem*. 'Idol worship in pre-Islamic Yathrib (Medina)', *Le Muséon* 106, 3-5 (1993): 331-346.

¹⁹⁵ G.R.D King. "The Prophet Muhammad and the Breaking of the Jāhiliyya Idols", in J. F. Healey and V. Porter, ed. *Studies on Arabia in Honour of Professor G. Rex Smith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 117. ("Archaeology in Arabia is virtually unable at present to comment on this process of image suppression and temple destruction that takes place with such intensity (in the Muslim sources) at the Prophet's bequest.")

wathan as terms for idols and rival accounts of the Arabian origins of idolatry.¹⁹⁶ Other works differ from Ibn al-Kalbī and give conflicting information on the sites and features of specific idols.¹⁹⁷ It has been shown that the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* evinces common tropes and motifs against idols found in Jewish and Christian polemics, and thus reflects later concerns, with material added from later sources.¹⁹⁸ In line with this revisionist account of the historical origins of the Qur'an, Hawting insists that the works of Ibn al-Kalbī and others are useful in revealing how the early Muslim community of the eighth to tenth centuries imagined *shirk* at the time of the Prophet, but not as an accurate historical resource.¹⁹⁹

For the purposes of this thesis, however, this is precisely the point. The aim of the present chapter is not to separate historical fact from fiction on the question of pre-Islamic Arabia. Rather, importance lies in the fact that the traditional image surveyed in this thesis has been accepted and internalised in later Islamic thought. As will be seen in later chapters, each of the figures examined in this thesis, from Ibn Taymiyya to Sayyid Quṭb, have accepted the traditional image of pre-Islamic Mecca as a center of idolatry, understood the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* to have worshipped idols of wood and stone, and used this image of pre-Islamic idolatry as a foil for the different manifestations of *shirk* in their own times. Herein lies the importance of the Islamic historical tradition. This chapter now turns to overview this material.

Idols and images in the Hadith

This section overviews some of the hadith materials relating to *shirk* and illustrates the relationship between the hadith sources and the Qur'an. It is worth noting at the outset that the terms for idols, *aṣnām* or *awthān*, occur frequently in the hadith collections, much more so than in the Qur'an. As shown in the previous chapter, the Qur'an uses these terms only rarely and almost exclusively in relation to the story of the prophet Abraham. In the hadith collections, however, these terms are regularly used to depict the Prophet's environment of seventh century Arabia:

It is narrated from 'Urwa ibn 'Abasa that he said to the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him); "with what were you sent?" He said "I was sent to uphold the ties of kinship, to break the idols (*kasr al-awthān*), so that God would be worshipped alone with no associate. (*sharīk*)"²⁰⁰

Many narrations focus on the correct Islamic practice regarding idols. This seems important in a newly Islamic environment in which the customs and memory of idol worship would have run deep. Thus, one narration tells of the Prophet warning not to sacrifice to idols, swear in their name or sell them.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ For an overview of the objections see Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2017), 65-66. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 92-110, 111-129.

¹⁹⁷ The idol *Allāt*, for example, is placed in Tā'if or Mecca depending upon the source and described as either a worked stone or an anthropomorphic figure with a "head". Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 16 and 138. W.R. Arafat. 'Fact and Fiction in the history of pre-Islamic idol worship', *Islamic Quarterly* 12 (1968), 8-10.

¹⁹⁸ Sinai, *The Qur'an*, 65. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 89-92.

¹⁹⁹ Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 66. This of course is the approach of Orientalist scholars like Ignaz Goldziher who understands the hadith traditions as conveying important information about the nature and dominant issues of concern for the Muslim communities compiling the hadiths, but not as an accurate historical resource conveying accurate information about the Prophet or early Muslims. See Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2 vols., Eng. translation (London: 1967), 89-125.

²⁰⁰ Ibn Hajjāj, Muslim. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), 2/832.

²⁰¹ Muslim. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3/758.

In another tradition, from the collection of Abū Dāwūd, an old woman comes to the Prophet asking of the correct Islamic practice regarding vows and sacrificial offerings. The Prophet's response is notable for it captures both the sense of a break with an idolatrous past and implies a distinction between *aṣnām* and *awthān* that is not readily apparent from the Qur'an itself:

It was said that a woman came to the Prophet and said; 'Messenger of God, I have taken a vow to play the tambourine over you'. He said; 'Fulfil your vow.' She said; 'And I have taken a vow to perform a sacrifice in such and such a place, a place in which people sacrificed in the *jāhiliyya*. He asked; 'for a *ṣanam*?' (*li-ṣanam*). She replied; 'No'. He asked; 'for a *wathan*?' (*li-wathan*) She replied; 'No'. He said; 'fulfil your vow.'²⁰²

The prophet Abraham uses the terms interchangeably in the Qur'an.²⁰³ The previous chapter noted how later commentators struggle to distinguish *ṣanam* from *wathan*. For al-Suhaylī (d. 1185), the term *ṣanam* applied to an object cut from stone, while *wathan* denoted something other than stone, like bronze.²⁰⁴ William-Lane presents a range of interpretations including the opposite; that *ṣanam* refers to an idol of metal, with *wathan* made from stone or wood. Another view is that *ṣanam* refers to an image, with *wathan* a shapeless object.²⁰⁵ Both terms relate to idols, then, but the fact that the Prophet ask two questions here would imply they are not complete synonyms. The hadith collections also include categories not found in the Qur'an, like hidden *shirk* (*shirk al-khaḥfī*) or lesser *shirk* (*shirk al-asghar*), usually referring to pious ostentation. The Prophet is reported to warn that hidden *shirk* is a constant threat to believers, harder to find than "the creeping of ant over a rock."²⁰⁶

Building on this, a major theme in the hadith and traditional sources is to clarify aspects of which the Qur'an is silent or ambiguous. Many hadiths thus explain and illustrate the meaning of Qur'anic verses that allude to *shirk*, such as the 'gods' worshipped by the community of the prophet Noah. The Qur'an lists these as *Wadd*, *Suwā'a*, *Yaghūth*, *Ya'ūq* and *Nasr* (71:23) but tells us nothing else about them, providing no information save the names and their purported status as 'gods'. The hadith materials fill this lacuna. A clarificatory report attributed to Ibn 'Abbās tells us the following:

These were among the idols of prophet Noah's nation, which in time ended up among the Arabs... These idols were named after some righteous men among Noah's people. When these righteous men died, Satan inspired the people to make statues of them, named after them. These statues were placed in their favourite meeting places as reminders of righteousness, and no one of that generation worshipped them.

²⁰² Sulaymān ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistānī al-Azdī, Abū Dāwūd. *Sunan*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1935), 3/3312.

²⁰³ See Q 6:74; 29:17.

²⁰⁴ Al-Suhaylī, Abū al-Qāṣim 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Abdullāh. *Al-Rawd al-Unūfī sharḥ al-sīra li-Ibn Hishām*, (Cairo, 1914), 1/62. C.f A. Guillaume. 'Stroking an Idol', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 27:2 (1964); 430.

²⁰⁵ See Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), I/1735-6. For further exploration of the great diversity of interpretation founds in tradition, see Fiorella Scagliarini. 'The words *ṣlm/ṣnm* and some words for "statue, idol" in Arabic and other Semitic languages', *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 37 (2007); 253-62.

²⁰⁶ Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, Aḥmad ibn 'Abdallāh. *Hilyat al-awliyā* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda wa al-Khānjī, 1357/1938), 7/112.

However, when that generation died off, the purpose of the statues was forgotten. The following generation from then on started to worship them.²⁰⁷

It seems that these names refer to the commemorative statues of saints, later worshipped outright. This illustrates the interplay between the Qur'an and hadith sources in terms of clarifying the Qur'anic allusions to *shirk*. In other cases, the early Muslim tradition moves beyond the text of the Qur'an and reads an image of pre-Islamic idolatry into highly ambiguous verses. We see this in the following verse:

They apportion to God a share of the produce and the livestock He created, saying 'This is for God' – so they claim – 'and this is for our associates (*shurakā'una*).' Their associates share does not reach God, but God's share does reach their associates: How badly they judge! (Q 6:136).

This verse alludes to some kind of practice in its immediate milieu. But it is also obscure and seems to presuppose knowledge on the part of its audience. The traditional sources give meaning to the verse by relating it to a custom and ritual of pre-Islamic idolatry. Ibn Ishāq explains this verse by way of a tribe named *Khawlān* that divided livestock and crops between God and their idol, '*Umyānis*, favouring the latter.'²⁰⁸ Ibn al-Kalbī offers the same explanation.²⁰⁹ Here, the commentators identify the unnamed 'associates' or *shurakā* in the Qur'an with a specific idol and an obscure verse is clarified via the traditional image of pre-Islamic idolatry. It is possible of course that this is a fictitious account designed to shed light on an unintelligible passage.²¹⁰ Yet the point for this chapter is that Ibn Ishāq and Ibn al-Kalbī read an image of pre-Islamic idolatry into a verse that does not explicitly refer to such.

A broader reading of the traditional material even challenges the Qur'anic account of *shirk* in places. The previous chapter examined the social and ethical dimensions of *shirk* in the Qur'an. The Qur'an's doctrinal critique of *shirk* is part of a larger condemnation that extends to the ethics and social malpractices of the *mushrikūn*. In the traditional sources, however, a more complex image emerges, wherein pre-Islamic society does appear to have had some praiseworthy attributes, notwithstanding the prevalence of *shirk* and idols. Several hadith narrations attest to this, as related by Yassin Dutton:

Any depiction of the (pre-Islamic period in Arabia known as the) Jahiliyya as 'all bad' is obviously an exaggeration: what the traditional sources tell us is not so simple. Rather, we recall Hind's comment, on making bay'a to the Prophet on the Day of the Conquest of Makka, 'Would a noble woman commit zina, Messenger of Allah?', with the obvious implication that noble women, even in the Jahiliyya, would not, along with the well-known hadith that 'The best of you in the Jahiliyya are the best of you in Islam, when they understand'.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans. *Sahih Bukhari: The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Bukhari* (Lahore: 1979-83), 6/414-5. This is also cited in Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 51-2. *The Book of Idols*, 44-5.

²⁰⁸ Ibn Ḥishām, 'Abd al-Malik. *The Life of Muhammad; A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sīrat rasūl Allah*, translated. A. Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 36-7. Ibn Ḥishām. *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Muḥammad al-Saqqa (Cairo: Dār Ihyā al-Turāth, 1955); 1/80-1.

²⁰⁹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 43-44. *Book of Idols*, 37-8.

²¹⁰ Isaiah Goldfield argues for the historical legitimacy of these reports. See I. Goldfield. 'Umaynis the idol of Khawlan', *IOS* 3 (1977); 108-19. For a summary of this argument, see Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 41.

²¹¹ Yasin Dutton. 'Reviewed work: The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History by G.R. Hawting', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:2 (2001), 178.

These hadiths indicate that the society of the *mushrikūn* was not entirely devoid of ethics and honour. We could also point to a high valuation of pre-Islamic, *jāhilī* poetry across later Muslim history. Later tradition also preserves a sense of admiration for the pre-Islamic qualities of hospitality, generosity and courage, captured in the concept of *murū'a*.²¹² None of this is found in the Qur'an. The interplay between the Qur'an and early tradition thus operates on several levels. The traditional literature can be seen to clarify, develop and at times even challenge the Qur'anic reflections of *shirk*.

Another theme frequently encountered in the hadith sources is the prohibition of images. The apparent opposition to figural imagery in Islam has long been of interest to Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.²¹³ This is not rooted in the Qur'an, which appears silent on the issue, but is seen across a range of hadith narrations. Many hadiths, for example, speak of angels not entering a house or room in which there are images.²¹⁴ The proscriptions can be broadly placed into two categories. On the one hand, several narrations link images with the threat of falling into *shirk*. This is implicit in the following:

Abū al-Hayāj al-Asadī said: 'Alī ibn Abi Ṭālib said to me: "Shall I not send you with the same instructions as the Messenger of God...sent me? 'Do not leave any image (*ṣūra*) without defacing it or any built-up grave without levelling it.'"'²¹⁵

Commenting on this, Ibn Qayyim (d. 1350) writes, "in most cases, the reason why nations fall into *shirk* is because of images (*al-ṣūr*)."²¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) says much the same.²¹⁷ The concern over images, icons and their veneration is of course not exclusive to Muslim sources. Marco Scholler notes the strong parallels between Ibn Taymiyya and the criticism of 'idolatrous' images in the works of the Protestant reformer, John Calvin (d. 1564).²¹⁸ Yet many other hadiths are concerned not with *shirk* but the idea that, in depicting a creature, the artist arrogantly claims God's creative power for himself. God alone is *al-Muṣawwir* (the 'fashioner') of creation.²¹⁹ Consider the following example:

²¹² For more on this see M.M. Bravman, *The Spiritual Background of Early Islam: studies in ancient Arabic concepts* (Leiden: Brill, 1972).

²¹³ For a brief, non-exhaustive overview of sources touching upon the question of Islam and images, see Sir Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Place of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1928), 1-40. G.R.G. King, 'Islam, Iconoclasm and the Declaration of Doctrine', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 48:2 (1985), 267-9. Oleg Grabar, 'From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image', *Museum International* 55:2 (2003); 46-53. K.A.C. Cresswell, 'The lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam', *Ars Islamica* 11/12 (1946); 159-66. Patricia Crone, 'Islam, Judeo-Christianity and Byzantine Iconoclasm', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980); 59-95. Mika Natif, 'The Painters Breath and Conceptions of Idol Anxiety in Islamic Art' in Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, ed., *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); 41-56. Ismā'īl al-Fārūqī, 'Misconceptions on the Nature of the Work of Art in Islam', *Islam and the Modern Age* Vol 1 no. 1 (1970): 29-49. Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect; essays on traditional science and sacred art* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987).

²¹⁴ Khan, trans. *Sahih Bukhari*, 9/645.

²¹⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3/969.

²¹⁶ Ibn Qayyim, al-Jawziyya. *Zād al-Ma'ād*, ed. Shu'ayb wa 'Abd al-Qādir al-Arn'āūt (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1986). 3/458.

²¹⁷ Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyyah. *Majmū'a al-Fatāwā* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Muḥammad 'Alī Bayḍūn : Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2000/1426), 17/462. ("the command is to destroy two types of images; images which represent the deceased, and images places on top of graves. *Shirk* may come about from both types.")

²¹⁸ Marco Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam* (Wiesbaden: Harrowitz, 2004), 71, n.378.

²¹⁹ See Al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God/al-Maṣḥab al-Asnā fī sharḥ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992), 68-70.

The Prophet said; those who make these images (*al-muṣawwirūn*) will be punished on the Day of Resurrection. It will be said to them, ‘give life to that which you have created!’²²⁰

This is, again, not exclusive to Islamic tradition. On the same grounds the early Christian Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) discusses art and images under the eighth commandment, the prohibition of theft.²²¹ In creating images, then, the hadiths suggest that man usurps God’s role as creator and fashioner, with image-making a vain attempt to equal God; an attempt that carries an intrinsic limit as artists are unable to give life to what they produce. In light of the many narrations that condemn the image-maker (*al-muṣawwir*), then, it is not surprising that Islamic legal discourse is critical of pictures, imagery and figuration. The Shāfi’ī jurist Sharaf al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d.1284) writes:

The authorities of our school and others hold that the making of picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and that it is one of the great sins, because it is specifically threatened with the grievous punishment mentioned in the Hadith...the crafting of it is forbidden under every circumstance, because it imitates the creative activity of God. This is the summary position of our school on the question, and the absolute majority of the Companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers the succeeding generations accepted it.²²²

However, there seems more ambiguity in the hadith sources than al-Nawawī allows. While criticism of artists, figuration and imagery is a major theme, other reports imply the image itself is not problematic, only its content and the context in which it is seen. The following report of an interaction between the Prophet and his wife ‘Ā’isha is a case in point:

Narrated Al-Qasim: Aisha said that she hung a curtain decorated with pictures on a curtain. The Prophet tore that curtain and so she turned it into two cushions, which remained in the house for the Prophet to sit on.²²³

This hadith does not explain the Prophet’s reaction nor ‘Ā’isha’s response, but it implies an ambivalence in the correct Islamic attitude and use of images. This seems to hinge on the difference between hanging an image, thus leading to distraction or perhaps even veneration, and placing an image in a less visible, or less respected, location. We cannot be sure. But it is worth briefly adding that the hadith and legal proscriptions did not stop the flowering of a rich tradition of artistic painting, imagery and figural representation across the history of Islamic civilisation, particularly in the Persian and Indian milieus.²²⁴

²²⁰ Khan, trans. *Sahih Bukhari*, 9/647; C.f, Natif. ‘The Painters Breath’, 43.

²²¹ Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God; the earliest Christians on Art* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 51. (“He (Clement) classifies art as a form of thievery, because the sculptor and the painter steal the truth from God. Using their mimetic skills, they pretend to make animals and plants, but this false and deceptive appropriation is nothing more than robbery.”)

²²² Sharaf al-Dīn Nawawī. *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Imām Muslim* (Cairo: Al-Maṭba‘a al-kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1305/1887), 8/398. See also Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Piece of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 9-10. C.f, Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49-50. Against this, Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223) writes the question of the legality of images depends upon what is depicted and where they are situated. See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2000), 145-6, n.2.

²²³ Cited in Jamal. J. Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion: Religious Art, Perception and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2012), 2. As seen in the title, this report acts as a starting-point for Elias’ study as a whole.

²²⁴ See the recent study of Christiane Gruber, *The Praiseworthy One: the Prophet Muhammad in Islamic Texts and Images* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019). The tension between the rich artistic and paintwork tradition in Islamic history, despite its clear prohibition in the hadith and legal sources, is a key to the pioneering study of Islamic civilisation in Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 5-113

Shirk, idols and the Ka'ba

For a religious tradition that is critical or ambivalent of images there is of course one famous exception. The *ka'ba*, the cuboid dome structure located in Mecca, enjoys a unique place in Muslim piety. The direction to which all Muslims perform prayer (*qibla*), its image adorns mosques, prayer mats and private homes across the Muslim world. As a core and universal symbol of Islam, it is perhaps the closest equivalent in Islam to a symbol like the Cross in Christianity.²²⁵ References to the *ka'ba* (literally 'cube') in the Qur'an are rare. The term is found in only two verses:

God had made the Ka'ba – the Sacred House – a means of support for people, and the Sacred Months, the sacrificial animals including the garlanded: all this. Know that God has knowledge of all that is in the heavens and the earth and that He is fully aware of all things. (Q 5:97 and 95)

Other references to an unspecified "house" (*al-bayt*) are seen by commentators to refer to the *ka'ba*.²²⁶ The Qur'an describes this 'house' as first constructed by the prophets Abraham and Ishmael as a shrine to one God.²²⁷ It notes this as the first place of worship established for people.²²⁸ Ibn Kalbī opens the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* with a common historiographical account, found throughout the sources, of how later generations diverged from message of Abraham and Ishmael and turned the *ka'ba* into a centre of idolatry, housing three hundred and sixty idols.²²⁹ The *ka'ba* is significant for this chapter for it is the scene of perhaps the most famous episode from the life of the Prophet. This is his destruction of the idols housed in the *ka'ba* upon the Muslim conquest of Mecca in the year 630 AD, known as the year of victory (*'ām al-fath*). This episode is entirely missing from the Qur'an but it is widely attested throughout the hadith and *sīra* literature. It is also, aside from the heavenly ascent known as the *Mi'rāj*, the event from the life of the Prophet that is most frequently immortalized in traditions of Islamic painting. From the *sīra* of Ibn Ishāq (d.770);

He (Muhammad) found a pigeon made of aloe-wood, and he broke this idol with his own hand and threw it outside. The other idols stood fixed with lead, and the prophet made a sign with his stick in the direction of the idols, saying 'truth has arrived and falsehood has gone, because falsehood was perishable.' Nor did he point to the front of any idol, but it fell down on its back, nor did he point to its back, but it fell down on its face. Not one idol remained standing... (He shouted) "People of Quraysh! God has freed from you from the arrogance of idolatry!"²³⁰

The is reportedly the Prophet's first act upon entering Mecca. Al-Azraqī includes a report that he spared images of Jesus and Mary found inside the *ka'ba*.²³¹ The implications of this, and what it reveals of the

²²⁵ Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 3. ("(it is) the only worked object that plays an obligatory part in Muslim worship.")

²²⁶ Q 2:125, 22:26.

²²⁷ Q 2:125-131; 22:26-30. Also cited in Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 4-6. *Book of Idols*, 4-5.

²²⁸ Q 3:96. The Qur'anic reference to 'bakka' it taken by exegetes as a reference to Mecca.

²²⁹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 5-7. *Book of Idols*, 6-8. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 21, 24-25 and 93-4. Cresswell. 'The lawfulness of Painting', 160. G.R.D King. 'The paintings of the pre-Islamic kaaba', *Muqarnas* 21:1 (2004), 219-29. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 2-3.

²³⁰ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: Apostle of Allah*, ed. Michael Edwardes (London: The Folio Society, 1964), 149. Also Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 68-9. Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 35-6. *The Book of Idols*, 27.

²³¹ Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, 7. K.A.C Cresswell. 'The lawfulness of Painting in Early Islam', *Ars Islamica* 11/12 (1946), 160. King. 'The paintings', 221.

Prophet's attitude to images, suggests a further ambivalence that has been explored by scholars.²³² These accounts do not explain why the Prophet found idol worship condemnable. Ibn Ishāq, al-Azraqī and others relate Muslim history, not theology, and presume the error of idol worship to be self-evident. Yet this episode also, more than any other, explicitly conflates *shirk* at the time of the Prophet with idolatry in a literal sense. Ibn al-Kalbī relates the following poem of a companion;

Have you not seen Muhammad and his men,
On the day of Victory, when the idols were demolished?
Then, the light of God shone with all its brilliance.
And *shirk* was submerged in a sea of darkness.²³³

The destruction of these idols marks a clear break with the pre-Islamic past and heralds the victory of Islam in Mecca. Later generations of Muslims have written works exploring the meaning, significance and implications of this iconic act. It is the longest and most detailed chapter in the prophetic biography of the eighteenth-century figure Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb (d. 1792), for example, and inspires his own campaign of shrine destruction.²³⁴ In a different vein, the modern Sufi writer Titus Burckhardt (d. 1984) offers a more spiritual or esoteric interpretation;

If the Kaabah is the heart of man, the idols, which inhabited it, represent the passions which invest the heart and impede the remembrance of God. Therefore, the destruction of the idols...is the clearest possible parable for Islam of the “one thing necessary”, which is the purification of the heart for the sake of tawhid, the bearing of witness that ‘there is no god but God’.²³⁵

As with the prophet Abraham in the Qur’an, in this episode the destruction of idols is constitutive of declaring the message of *tawḥīd*. If the presence of physical idols is the major manifestation of *shirk* in the Prophet's time, the destruction of idols seems the clearest means of awakening people to the doctrine of the oneness of God. This removal of the idols, moreover, returns the *ka‘ba* to its primordial state as a shrine to the one God, first established by Abraham and Ishmael, cementing the tie between the *ka‘ba*, Abraham and the Prophet.²³⁶ But it is also possible to give this a political reading. Beyond affirming the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the destruction of idols heralds the political victory of Islam and signals the reform of society in line with Islamic precepts. It marks the reforms of the unjust norms, values and customs of the pre-Islamic society of which idols were such a defining part. Seen from this angle, the Prophet's destruction of idols appears no less a political act.

²³² Cresswell. ‘The Lawfulness of Painting’, 159-66. King. ‘The paintings’, 221. Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 29. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 2.

²³³ Ibn al-Kalbī. *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 31. *The Book of Idols*, 27.

²³⁴ Noted in Martin Riexinger. ‘Rendering Muḥammad Human Again: The Prophetology of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’, *Numen* 60 (2013), 111-13.

²³⁵ Burckhardt, *Art of Islam*, 5.

²³⁶ Often stressed in the tradition, see Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry*, 24-5.

Early Muslim idol destruction

This episode also reveals that *shirk* at the time of the Prophet is not just conceived by Ibn al-Kalbī and others as a doctrinal or metaphysical error. Rather, it had tangible manifestations in the social sphere. Though rooted in doctrinal notions of divinity, *shirk* had a social and political dimension. This chapter turns to explore this in more detail. The following section examines the accounts of early Muslim idol destruction in the traditional sources. This gives a revealing insight into this social dimension of *shirk*, particularly the rootedness of idols in the social and tribal fabric of Arabia at the time of the Prophet. Above all, it must be stressed that the Prophet's destruction of idols was not unique. Though iconic, it did not stand *sui generis*. Ibn al-Kalbī and others relate many stories of idol destruction carried out by the Prophet, companions and early converts to the faith. The sources give an impression that idol destruction was a common practice for the early Muslim community, a means of signifying a rupture with pre-Islamic past and of embracing of the new faith.

From Ibn al-Kalbī and others the impression emerges that as the Prophet's position in Arabia grew stronger, he would dispatch followers to destroy the idols of surrounding areas. Ibn al-Kalbī reports that while travelling towards Mecca, that is, shortly before destroying idols in the *ka'ba*, the Prophet sent 'Ali ibn Abī Tālib to destroy the idol *al-Manāt*:

The Quraysh and the rest of the Arabs continues to venerate *al-Manāt* until the Apostle of God set out from Medina in the eighth year of the *hijra*, the year in which God granted him victory. When he was at a distance of four or five nights from Medina, he sent 'Ali to destroy her. 'Ali (then) destroyed her. ²³⁷

The same fate awaited *al-Lāt* and *al-'Uzza*, also named in the Qur'an (53:19-22). Ibn al-Kalbī reports the Prophet dispatched his followers 'Amr ibn al-Mundhīr and Khālīd ibn al-Walīd to destroy them.²³⁸ The destruction of *al-'Uzza* is addressed later in this chapter. But idol destruction is not only the work of the Prophet or companions. A common theme in the literature is that conversion to Islam entails the destruction of one's previous idol.²³⁹ This is reflected in the story of the custodian of the idol, *Nuhm*:

The custodian of *Nuhm* was called Khuzā'ī ibn-'Abd Nuhm of the Muzaynah (tribe)... When he heard of the Prophet, he sped to the spot, destroyed the idol, and then said: "I went to *Nuhm* to offer a sacrificial devotion to it, as I used to do. But then on second thought I said to myself, 'This is but a mute god, dumb and void of intellect.' And so I refused my sacrifice. (I then said) 'From this day forth my faith is that of Muhammad, (and) the great God of heaven, the all-Mighty.'" ²⁴⁰

Idol destruction is synonymous with embracing Islam. It signals a break with an idolatrous past and a loyalty to the new faith. These accounts also point to another dynamic in the encounter of early Islam and idols. This is the element of space and territory. The sense to be gleaned from the *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*

²³⁷ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 15. *Book of Idols*, 13. This is also cited in King. 'The Prophet Muhammad', 107.

²³⁸ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 16 and 25-6. *Book of Idols*, 15 and 22.

²³⁹ On this point see Lecker. 'Was Arabia Idol Worship...?', 3-24.

²⁴⁰ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 40. *Book of Idols*, 34. See Lecker. 'Idol worship', 343. ("unsurprisingly, idols figure in the stereotypical stories of conversion to Islam which have a recurrent pattern; the destruction of the idol by the former pagan (or by his friend) signifies a break with past superstitions.")

and other works is that idol destruction directly parallels and is proportionate to the territorial expansion of the early Muslim community: as word of the Prophet spread, idols were destroyed. The destruction of idols thus establishes communal boundaries; it is a means of demarcating sacred space for the early Muslims. The destruction of *Manāt* by ‘Alī, then, reflects as much the increased strength and emergence of the early Muslim community in Arabia as the error of idolatry itself. This adds another layer to our reading of *shirk* in Ibn al-Kalbī. It offers a dynamic of *shirk* and communal space that is not apparent from the Qur’an itself.²⁴¹

At this point it is worth noting, albeit briefly, that Ibn al-Kalbī and other writers never question the legitimacy of destroying idols. The sense is that idol-worship is self-evidently stupid or irrational. In the destruction of *Nuhm*, for example, the custodian need only realise that *Nuhm* is a ‘mute god, dumb and devoid of intellect.’ The hold of the idol cannot withstand a moment of critical reflection. A related theme is of idolaters embracing Islam after seeing their idol unable to defend itself from destruction. This alone demonstrates the powerlessness of the idols and breaks its hold over the worshipper. Al-Wāqidī reports the companion Amr ibn al-‘Ās was sent by to destroy the idol *Suwā*; its custodian warns of the grave risks if it is attacked, but quickly converts after seeing ‘Amr effortlessly destroy the idol.²⁴² Elsewhere, the idol need not be destroyed. It suffices to see it in a degrading position. Ibn Sa’d recounts the following story of a figure known as Rashīd ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi:

Rashīd had been custodian of an idol of the (tribe) Banu Sulaym. One day he saw two foxes urinating on it, and he then said, “Can a Lord have two foxes urinating on his head? He is debased whoever has foxes urinating on him!” Then he assaulted it and shattered it.²⁴³

This is a repeated theme in the literature.²⁴⁴ The embarrassment of the idol is enough to prove the falsity of idol worship and leads to the conversion of Rashīd. The message throughout the early Muslim sources is therefore clear; idolatry is irrational, and it takes but a moment of thoughtfulness by the idolater, of witnessing the idol in a compromising position or its destruction, to show this.²⁴⁵

The appeal of idols

The reports of idol destruction in Ibn al-Kalbī and others act as a mark of conversion to Islam, signalling the futility of idols, a break with the pre-Islamic past and the territorial spread of the Muslim community.

²⁴¹ For a study of *shirk* in relation to sacred space and communal boundary-making in early Islam, as alluded to in the hadith sources, see Harry Munt. ‘No Two Religions’; Non-Muslims in the early Islamic Hijaz”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78:2 (2015); 249-69.

²⁴² Al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, 2/870. See also Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 9-10. *Book of Idols*, 8-9.. For a very similar account but with different companion and idol, this time the figure of Mughīra ibn ‘Shu’ba and the idol *al-Lāt*, see King, “The Prophet Muhammad”, 95-6.

²⁴³ Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-kubra*, 1/249. Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion*, 107. King. ‘The Prophet Muhammad’, 93. Lecker. ‘Was Arabia Idol Worship...?’, 15. For anecdotes involving urine, humiliation and idols in the Islamic sources; Chase F Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 173-4.

²⁴⁴ For an overview, see Lecker. ‘Idol worship’, 333-336 and 338-40, p. 343. (“the destruction of the idol by the former pagan signifies a break with past superstitions and symbolises loyalty to the new faith.”)

²⁴⁵ This reflects typical monotheist polemics, with clear echoes of Jewish-Christian literature against idols and their followers. See for example Jan Assman. ‘What’s Wrong with Images?’, in *Idol Anxiety*, 25-6. Assman notes some of the satirical tirades against idolatry in the Bible, including Ps. 115:2-9, Jeremiah 10:1-16, 44:9-20.

Upon closer reading, however, another aspect can be gleaned from these reports. In the same sources, the idea emerges that the early Muslims were keen to destroy idols not merely as an assertive declaration of the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, or to herald the victory of Islam, but for more defensive reasons. Many reports point to the continuing appeal of idols, revealing the deep roots and attachment to idolatry in pre-Islamic Arabia and, with it, the reluctance of many, even converted Muslims, to fully renounce idols. Early Muslim idol-destruction, then, can also be read as a practical measure to block any relapse to idolatry on the part of these newly-converted communities.

We find several examples of this. Al-Wāqidī describes the difficult negotiations between the *al-Thaqīf* tribe and the Prophet over their idol, the aforementioned *al-Lāt*. Al-Wāqidī reports that the tribe asked for a stay of execution for *al-Lāt* upon their conversion to Islam. They followed this with a request that *al-Lāt* remain in place for a year. The Prophet refused both yet assents to the request that *al-Thaqīf* did not have to destroy the idol themselves.²⁴⁶ Ibn al-Kalbī alludes to this. He reports that *al-Thaqīf* were warned by the Prophet not to return to worship *al-Lāt*, nor avenge its destruction.²⁴⁷ Scholars survey these reports and suggest an economic significance to *al-Lāt* – the idol was central to economic life and perhaps had a similar economic and cultural role to that of the *ka‘ba* for the Quraysh.²⁴⁸ Yet we should not discount the sense of religious attachment to *al-Lāt* that also emerges in the literature. An instance of this is al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 923) account of how the women of *al-Thaqīf* mourned the loss of *al-Lāt*. Appearing in public with their heads uncovered, the women cried;

Oh, shed tears for the protector *al-Lāt*
 Ignoble ones have forsaken here,
 those not competent in wielding swords.²⁴⁹

These lamentations are said to have occurred after the destruction of *al-Lāt* - that is, after the tribe’s conversion to Islam. The women of *al-Thaqīf* mourning the loss of their idol, then, accusing the men of failing to protect it, were converted Muslims.

Nor is the case of *al-Thaqīf* unique. A similar story is found regarding the idol *Dhu‘l-Khalaṣa*. Ibn Sa‘d reports that *Dhu‘l-Khalaṣa* remained in place even after its tribe, the *al-Daws*, converted to Islam and prayed towards Mecca. The smaller idols surrounding *Dhu‘l-Khalaṣa* were destroyed but the main idol

²⁴⁶ Al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, III/ 972. See also King, ‘The Prophet Muhammad’, 99. (“It is evident from the sources that there remained opposition in *al-Ṭā‘if* to the breaking of their idols and it is because of this that the *Thaqīf* were warned by the Prophet against exacting revenge for its destruction of resuming their worship of *al-Lāt* after becoming Muslims.”) Lecker, *Was Arabia Idol Worship...?*, 10-12.

²⁴⁷ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 17. *Book of Idols*, 15.

²⁴⁸ M. J. Kister, ‘Some reports concerning al-Ṭā‘if’, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 1 (1979), 4-5. Lecker, ‘Was Arabia Idol Worship...?’, 14. (“the rich evidence of the complicated negotiations with the *Thaqīf* delegation...point to the idols central role both economically and spiritually.”)

²⁴⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī; the Last Years of the Prophet*, trans. Poonawala (New York: 1990), 47. See also King, ‘The Prophet Muhammad’, 99.

remained. The Prophet asks the companion Jarīr ibn ‘Abdullāh about the fate of the idol and thus orders its destruction. The story is worth recounting in full:

The Prophet asked (Jarīr) what was happening in his area and he said ‘O Prophet, God has made Islam appear (among them) and the call to prayer has manifested itself in their mosques and courtyards. The tribes have destroyed the idols (*aṣnām*) which they used to worship’. (The Prophet) said; ‘what happened to *Dhu’l-Khalaṣa*?’ (Jarīr) said; ‘It remains in its place but God will do with it as he pleases, God willing.’ So the Prophet of God... send him to destroy *Dhu’l-Khalaṣa* ... but he said, “I do not remain ready (in the saddle) on a horse’. The Prophet...stroked his chest and said, “O God! Make him guided and guided in true religion!” (Jarīr) then went out with his people numbering some two hundred in all. He was not away long until he returned. The Prophet... said; ‘did you destroy it?’ He said; ‘Yes! By He who sent you in truth. I took what was on (*Dhu’l-Khalaṣa*) and I burnt it in fire. I left it in such a state of destruction that they who have an affection for it will be deterred from it and no-one stopped us.’²⁵⁰

As with the women of *al-Thaqīf*, Ibn al-Kalbī reports the women of *al-Daws* mourning the destruction of *Dhu’l-Khalaṣa*.²⁵¹ Yet this report is valuable for it suggests a brief period of co-existence between the newly-converted *al-Daws* and their previous idol; something the Prophet ended when informed of it. The appeal of *Dhu’l-Khalaṣa* for the *al-Daws* was not entirely extinguished with their conversion to Islam, then, and G.R. King adds that Jarīr’s claim that he was not a strong rider, “may have been true, but it also has the appearance of an excuse for inaction.”²⁵² King suggests Jarīr reached a deal with the *al-Daws* wherein the tribe accepted Islam but its main idol remained, spared the destruction afforded lesser idols.²⁵³ In any case, the reluctance to renounce idols after conversion to Islam is evident in the sources. The continued existence of *Dhu’l-Khalaṣa* the lamentations of the women of *al-Daws* and the potential reluctance of Jarīr all point to the continued attachment of the tribe to its idol. In short, it seems both the *al-Thaqīf* and *al-Daws* were willing to embrace the doctrinal message of Islam but wished for the social manifestations of their previous religion, their idols, to remain in place. The Prophet’s order of idol destruction was a means of removing *shirk* in all its facets.

It is often claimed that idolatry was already in decline in pre-Islamic Arabia at the advent of Islam. This is usually on the basis of material found in the sources of pre-Islamic poetry, and is said to have paved the way for the monotheistic message of the Prophet. Scholars describe pre-Islamic Arabs as hardly devoted to their idols. R.A Nicholson writes;

Religion had so little influence on the lives of the pre-Islamic Arabs that we cannot expect to find much trace of it in their poetry... of real piety the ordinary Bedouin knew nothing...He may invoked Allah in the hour of need, as a drowning man will clutch at a straw, but his faith in superstitious ceremonies was stronger. He did not take his religion too seriously.²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt al-kubra*, 1/77-8. King. ‘The Prophet Muhammad’, 99-101. Lecker. ‘Was Arabia Idol Worship...?’, 21.

²⁵¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 36-7. *Book of Idols*, 31.

²⁵² King. ‘The Prophet Muhammad’, 101.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ R. A Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), 135. For similar claims see Arafat. ‘Fact and Fiction’, 20. (“any idea of religion (among the Arabs) as such was very vague, and the majority of the Bedouins...were finding it difficult to acquire intelligent as well as deep faith.”) J. Henninger, ‘Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion’, in Merlin L. Swarz, ed. *Studies on Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 7-8. G. Levi Della Vida, *Les Sémites et leur rôle dans l’histoire religieuse* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1938), 89-90. For an overview, Lecker. ‘Was Arabian Idol Worship...’, 1-3.

William Montgomery-Watt labels pre-Islamic idolatry as “uninfluential in Muhammad’s time.”²⁵⁵ The traditional sources surveyed in this chapter suggest otherwise. The works of Ibn al-Kalbī, Ibn Sa‘d, al-Wāqidī and others speak of the struggle of converted tribes to fully renounce idols. It is not possible to assess the depth of religious feeling in the sources, but reports do at times stress the sense of emotional attachment to idols. Ibn al-Kalbī alludes to this in relating the final wish of one of the pre-Islamic Arabs:

Al-‘Uzza continued to be venerated until God sent His Prophet who ridiculed her together with the other idols and forbade her worship... This proved very hard upon the Quraysh. Then Abū Uḥayḥah was taken sick by what proved to be his last and final sickness. As he lay on his deathbed, Abū Lahab came to visit and found him weeping. ‘What makes you weep... is it death which is inevitable?’ Abū Uḥayḥah replied; ‘No. But I fear that *al-‘Uzza* will not be worshipped after I depart!’²⁵⁶

Far from irrelevant, then, we get a sense from Ibn al-Kalbī and others that the continuing appeal of idols lent real, practical need for their destruction by the Prophet. Seen from this angle, early Muslim idol destruction becomes less a marker of conversion to Islam, more a means of blocking a return to idolatry.

We can explore this point further. It could be argued that the source of the appeal of idols has deeper roots, far from exclusive to the pre-Islamic Arabs. Something of the physical visibility of idols, perhaps, is appealing. Figures from different religious traditions have long noted the human attraction to sensory images and representations of the divine. This is key to the defence of devotional and liturgical use of icons by the early Church father, John of Damascus (d. 749). For John, icons and images serve as reminders for believers and encourage good works and piety.²⁵⁷ Even reformation-era critics like John Calvin (d. 1564) do not deny the appeal of icons; indeed, therein lay precisely the threat of idolatry as the icon replaced the God it represented.²⁵⁸ Major figures from the Islamic tradition write much the same. The eleventh-century polymath Abū Rayḥān Muḥammad al-Birūnī (d. 1050), for example, views ordinary Muslims as no less attracted to sensory images than other groups. Al-Birūnī observes Hindu idol worship in India and likens this to popular Muslim piety;

It is well known that the popular mind leans towards the sensible world, and has an aversion to the world of abstract thought which is only understood by highly educated people, of whom in every time and place there are only a few... these words of mine would at once receive a sufficient illustration if, for example, a picture of the Prophet were made... and shown to an uneducated (Muslim) man or woman. Their joy in looking at the thing would bring them to kiss the picture, to rub their cheeks against it, and to roll themselves in the dust before it, as if they were seeing not the picture, but the original.²⁵⁹

Al-Birūnī presumes a social hierarchy between the religious elite (*al-khāṣṣ*) and the mass of ordinary believers (*al-‘āam*). He explains that popular attraction to sensory objects is the primary reason behind

²⁵⁵ William Montgomery-Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), 23.

²⁵⁶ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 23. *Book of Idols*, 20.

²⁵⁷ See Leslie Brubaker. ‘Byzantine Art in the Ninth-Century: Theory, Practice and Culture’, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 13(1989), 61-2 and 65-6. See also John of Damascus (Saint). *On Divine Images: Three Apologies against those who attack the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2nd edition 2002).

²⁵⁸ C.M.N. Eire, *War Against the Idols; the Reformation of Europe from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 195-234. For more on Calvin’s objection; Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37-67.

²⁵⁹ Edward C. Sachau, *Alberuni’s India* (Boston: Adamant Media, 1888, reprint 2005), 1/111. Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion*, 117-8.

the creation of idols.²⁶⁰ Yet Muslims were not immune from this and would resemble Hindu idolaters if they had images of the Prophet. For al-Birūnī, then, the issue of idolatry or *shirk* is not one of religious adherence, but intellectual class. Idols attract because they fulfil a human attraction to sensory images, an attraction that only the religious elite can transcend.

This offers another angle from which to see the reluctance of *al-Thaqīf* and *al-Daws* to renounce idols. The struggle of these tribes reflects more than just the rootedness of idols in pre-Islamic Arabia, perhaps, and points to a deeper human attraction to sensory objects or representations of the divine. On this basis it is tempting to note some of the vivid descriptions of idols found in the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*:

(The idol *wadd*) was a statue of a huge man, as big as the largest of human beings, covered with two robes, clothed with the one and cloaked with the other, carrying a sword on his waist and a how on his shoulder, and holding in (one) hand a spear to which was attached a standard, and (in the other) a quiver full of arrows.²⁶¹

The doctrine of *tawḥīd* runs directly counter to this. Against the appeal of sensory images, the Prophet preaches the doctrine of a non-visible God. Against the many idols that the Arabs could visualise, the Prophet preaches a God that is immaterial, inaccessible to our perception. Idols are easily accessible while the Islamic conception of God retains an aspect of mystery. The difference between the vivid imagery of idols in the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* and the following description of the nature of God, attributed to ‘Alī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, is clear:

None can fully understand his being however hard he may try. Reason and sagacity cannot visualise Him. Intelligence, understanding and attainments cannot attain the depth of knowledge to study of scrutinise His divinity. Human faculties of conception, perception and learning, and attributes of volition, intuition and apprehension cannot perceive Him or fathom the extent of His might and Glory.²⁶²

Believers are drawn to the sensory world while the Qur’an speaks of a God who is utterly unique and dissimilar from creation: “there is nothing like Him” (42:11) and “No vision can take Him in, be He takes in all vision” (6:103). The Prophet and early Muslims destroy idols, then, not just to affirm the doctrine of *tawḥīd*, that there is ‘no god but God’. The campaigns of early Muslim idol destruction can also be read as an implicit acknowledgement of the human attraction to sensory images and the ease with which believers can be drawn away from the worship of one God. The chief appeal of idolatry, the major reflection of *shirk* in the life of the Prophet, thus lies not in its doctrinal or metaphysical claims, but precisely in its real, tangible manifestations in the social sphere. This social dimension of *shirk*, in short, was the greatest obstacle to the Prophet and the spread of Islam.

²⁶⁰ Elias, *Aisha’s Cushion*, 117-8.

²⁶¹ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣnām*, 56. *Book of Idols*, 49.

²⁶² ‘Alī Ibn Abi Ṭālib. *Nahjul Balāgha*, ed. Ustādh Muḥammad ‘Abduh (Cairo: Dār al-M‘arifah, n.d), 14. Also, *Peak of Eloquence (Nahjul Balāgha); Sermons, Letters and Sayings of Imām ‘Alī Ibn Abi Ṭālib* (Karachi, Pakistan; Islamic Seminary Publications, 2017), 137.

The power of idols

In closing, this chapter briefly illustrates a tension in Ibn al-Kalbī over the essential nature of idols. The *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* contains numerous reports of idol destruction that are held to reflect the inefficacy and powerlessness of idols and, following this, the irrationality of idol worship. But elsewhere, and in seeming contradiction to this, Ibn al-Kalbī ascribes a power and agency to idols that makes them a threat to the early Muslims. Ibn al-Kalbī's account of the destruction of *al-'Uzza* is a case in point. He reports that the Prophet dispatched the companion Khālid ibn al-Walīd to a valley called *Nakhla*, where there stood three trees. Khālid was commanded to cut the first tree down. Upon returning, the Prophet asked if he saw anything; he replied that he did not. Khālid returned and cut down a second tree, with the same response. On the third visit, Ibn al-Kalbī reports:

When Khālid arrived on the scene he found a black Abyssinian woman with dishevelled hair and her hands on her shoulders, gnashing and grating her teeth. Behind her stood Dubayya al-Sulāmī, then custodian of *al-'Uzza*. When Dubayya saw Khālid approaching, he said: 'O *al-'Uzza*... summon your strength and deal Khālid an unmistakable blow! For unless you kill him on this day, You shall be doomed to ignominy and shame!' Thereupon Khālid replied; 'O *al-'Uzza*, may you be blasphemed! Not exalted! Verily I see God has abased you.'" Turning to the woman, he (Khālid) dealt her a blow which severed her head, and she crumbled into ashes. He cut down the tree and killed Dubayya the custodian, after which he returned to the Prophet and reported his exploit. The Prophet then said; 'That was *al-'Uzza*, but she is no more. The Arabs shall have none after her. She shall never be worshipped again.'²⁶³

This report is not found in the hadith collections, but its appearance in *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām* reveals its presence and circulation in the early Muslim community. The Mu'tazilī al-Jāhiz (d.868) also relates the story.²⁶⁴ Black women emerging from idols even seems a common trope; al-Azraqī includes this in his account of the Prophet's destruction of idols in the *ka'ba*.²⁶⁵ The key is that *al-'Uzza* is not presented as inanimate or powerless; hence the need for Khālid to return three times to ensure its destruction. The idol *al-'Uzza* is not simply an inert, inanimate stone. Jamal J. Elias writes:

The implications of Ibn al-Kalbi's account of the killing of *al-'Uzza* are clear; Muhammad did not deny that *al-'Uzza* was *real*. She was not a mere tree that the deluded Arabs, in their ignorance, insisted on worshipping... Clearly, Ibn al-Kalbi did not deny the existence of other gods or that idols or icons possessed supernatural powers. He simply believed that Allah was superior to them all; part of the proof of this was that his worshippers could vanquish all other gods as well as their devotees.²⁶⁶

Briefly, the later Islamic tradition is also replete with accounts of the power of idols and the danger they posed for Muslims. The explorer al-Muqaddasī (d. 991), for example, writes of two idols found in India:

As for the idols in this region, there are two in Harawa made of stone; no one approaches them. They have a power such that should a man try to lay his hand on one, it will be held back and will not reach the idol... it is said that if one expresses a wish in their presence, the request will be granted... the two statues are quite enchanting. I saw a Muslim man who said he had forsaken Islam to return to the worship

²⁶³ Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, 25-6. *Book of Idols*, 21-2. This account is mentioned in secondary literature, see King, "The Prophet Muhammad", 97-8. W.R. Arafāt, 'Fact and Fiction', 18 and Elias, *A'isha's Cushion*, 107.

²⁶⁴ Al-Jāhiz. *Kitāb al-Hayawān*, ed. A.S. Harūn (Cairo: 1957-8), 201. C.f., W.R. Arafāt, 'Fact and Fiction', 18-9.

²⁶⁵ Al-Azraqī. *Akhbār Makka*, I/122-3. See also Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 68-9.

²⁶⁶ Elias, *A'isha's Cushion*, 107. (italics in original quote).

of the idols, having been captivated by them; when he returned to Nayasbur (in Iran) he became Muslim again. The two idols really are miraculous!²⁶⁷

We see a clear sense of wonder and wariness in this passage. Al-Muqaddasī speaks of the danger of the idols, their power to grant wishes and to even lure Muslims into forsaking Islam. For Ibn al-Kalbī and al-Muqaddasī, then, idols possess a degree of agency that make them more than just inanimate objects. It would seem that we have shifted far from the repeated emphasis in the Qur'an, outlined in the previous chapter, on the powerlessness and futility of any 'associate' and 'god' worshipped in place of God. In its explicit mention of *al-'Uzza*, moreover, the Qur'an condemns this as "nothing but names that you have invented yourselves." (53:23) There seems a tension, then, as Ibn al-Kalbī has neither the Prophet nor Khālid deny the metaphysical reality of *al-'Uzza*. It is seen to exist in a meaningful sense but it is inferior to God, as shown in its destruction. In this light Ibn al-Kalbī illustrates an implicit tension in early Muslim sources between monotheism and monolatry; the latter defined as worship of one god despite the belief in the existence of other gods. Elias again writes:

Belief that there is no God except Allah is the fundamental point of Muslim doctrine, to the extent that the profession of faith (*shahāda*) - the formal act through which a person becomes a Muslim- is a declaration to this effect (together with the acceptance of Muhammad as God's Prophet). However, beyond the level of credal statements, the distinction between monotheism (the belief in only one God) and monolatry (the worship of only one God) is not as clearly maintained. Indeed, early Muslim sources speak of the existence of other gods, albeit false ones.²⁶⁸

Ibn al-Kalbī's report of the destruction of *al-'Uzza* is a clear case in point. The Prophet does not destroy *al-'Uzza* because of its powerlessness and inefficacy, but for the opposite. He aims to destroy an object that he acknowledges to exist in a meaningful sense.

Conclusion

This chapter does not aim at an exhaustive account of all material relating to *shirk* in what we have termed the 'early Muslim tradition'. A full overview of this lies beyond the scope of one chapter. Rooted primarily in a reading of Ibn al-Kalbī's *Kitāb al-Aṣṅām*, it has instead sought to survey the relevant sources and draw out two key themes. The first is to stress the difference between the Qur'anic reflection on the *mushrikūn* and that found in the hadith, *sīra* and Ibn al-Kalbī. The Qur'an presents a rich and multifaceted account of what it means to 'associate' with God in its immediate milieu. It alludes to the worship of unnamed 'associates', 'gods', 'equals', angels and other terms, yet we get no clear image of the identity of the opponents of the Prophet, nor the nature of their *shirk*. This is precisely what is found in the early Muslim tradition. Here, the Qur'an's complex and elusive ways of discussing *shirk* gives way to an explicit image of Meccan idolatry. The *mushrikūn* are depicted as idolaters in a literal sense.

²⁶⁷ Al-Muqaddasi. *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*, translated by Basil Collins (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2001), 390. See also al-Muqaddasī, M. ibn Aḥmad. *Kitāb aḥsan al-taqāsīm fī ma'rifat al-aqālīm*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1906). C.f. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion*, 116-7. See also Bruce B. Lawrence. 'Shahrastāni on Indian Idol Worship.' *Studia Islamica*, No. 38 (1973), 62.

²⁶⁸ J. J. Elias. 'God', in *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*, ed. J. J. Elias (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2010), 178.

Unnamed ‘associates’ and ‘gods’ in the Qur’an are equated with specific idols from pre-Islamic Arabia, with the sources providing a wealth of information on idols. This is in evidence perhaps no more so than in the iconic account of the Prophet’s destruction of idols in the *ka’ba* upon the conquest of Mecca, an episode nowhere found in the Qur’an.

This leads us to a second key theme. The rich material pertaining to idols, and the many reports of their destruction at the hands of the Prophet and companions, tells us that early historians like Ibn al-Kalbī did not limit *shirk* to a doctrinal error. *Shirk* carried no less a social dimension, with idols deeply rooted in the cultural and tribal fabric of early Islamic society. Reports of the struggle of early Muslims to renounce idols, even lamenting their destruction, suggest that this social manifestation of *shirk* was perhaps a greater obstacle to the Prophet than its doctrinal facet. In the eyes of Islamic historical tradition, then, the Prophet did not condemn *shirk* or preach the doctrine of *tawhīd* in abstract terms. Integral to this was an active reshaping of society, involving the destruction of idols that were seen as tangible manifestations of *shirk* in the social sphere.

The question arises as to what this means for future conceptions of *shirk*, after the idols were destroyed. While ‘association’ with God in the life of the Prophet is manifest in the idols of *al-‘Uzza*, *al-Manāt*, *Nuhm* and others, this image of *shirk* quickly becomes obsolete once these idols are destroyed and the nascent Muslim community moves beyond its Arabian milieu. This question, of course, provides a neat springboard for the rest of this thesis. As will be shown, each of the figures surveyed in this thesis accept the image of *shirk* in the life of the Prophet that has been surveyed in this chapter. These figures even conceive of the nature of pre-Islamic idolatry in ways that are clearly shaped by their intellectual contexts and projects: this is clear, for instance, when Ibn Taymiyya writes how pre-Islamic idols were taken as objects of love (*al-maḥabba*) besides God, or when Muḥammad ‘Abduh describes the nature of pre-Islamic idolatry as irrational. Yet it will also be shown that each of these thinkers uses this historical image of pre-Islamic idolatry as a foil for the *shirk* of their own age. For each of these figures, from Ibn Taymiyya to Quṭb, the sin of *shirk* was no longer manifest in the pre-Islamic idols of *al-‘Uzza* or *al-Manāt*, yet the problem of ‘association’ remained and had assumed different forms, comprising a major obstacle to their reformist projects in the Muslim societies of their age. And if the Qur’an itself has many ways of expressing what it means to ‘associate’ with God, this multiplicity is reflected throughout this thesis as the nature, meaning and manifestations of *shirk* are constantly reinterpreted and repackaged by these different thinkers, each in line with their respective contexts. This thesis now turns to explore this in more detail.

Chapter III: Love, saints and *shirk*: Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328)

God will bring forth a people He loves, and they will love Him (Q 5:54)

It is Ibn Taymiyya's distinction that he opposed by word and deed almost every aspect of religion practiced in the Mamluk Empire.²⁶⁹

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a uniquely turbulent period of Muslim history. From the West, Crusader forces captured Palestine and parts of Syria. The Eastern half of the Muslim world, including the great Abbasid capital Baghdad, faced destruction by the Mongol armies. The horror and brutality of the Mongol invasions, their slaughter of the Caliph, was unprecedented in Muslim history. The Islamic Empire itself had long fractured into various competing dynasties. The Mamlūk Sultanate (1250-1517) in Egypt was particularly chaotic, characterized by frequent violent changes of power.²⁷⁰ The medieval historian Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1234) offers a neat overview of the era:

Islam and Muslims have during this period been afflicted by such disasters that no other nation has experienced. One such experience came from the invasion of the Tartars (Mongols). They came from the East and inflicted incredible damages. Another was the arrival of the Franks (Crusaders), God's curse be on them, (who came) from the West... But another affliction was that the Muslims themselves had been divided, and their swords lifted up against their fellows.²⁷¹

Muslim thinkers responded to the trauma in various ways. Some jurists such as Yaḥya ibn Sharaf an-Nawawī (d. 1284) offered a self-critical analysis. For an-Nawawī, the standards of the religious scholars or '*ulamā*' had fallen to a degree that precipitated the moral decline of the Muslim community. Contemporary jurists had failed to sustain the exacting standards of the jurists of the past and this decline in religious guidance caused division and weakness in the community at large.²⁷² More commonly, Muslims interpreted events in apocalyptic terms. Ibn Kathīr's (d. 1378) voluminous *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya* (The Beginning and the End) explains the chaos of the age as signalling the end times.²⁷³ The *Bidāya* became the basis for numerous Mamlūk-era historical works.²⁷⁴

The noted Muslim reformer Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) emerges from this period.²⁷⁵ He is widely seen as one of the most incisive and controversial thinkers of Islamic history. He is also

²⁶⁹ D. P. Little, 'Religion Under the Mamluks', *The Muslim World* 73 (1983); 180.

²⁷⁰ Much of this general overview of the period is derived from Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, law and community in Islamic Thought: the Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 173-196. R. Kevin Jacques, *Authority, Conflict and Transmission of Diversity in Medieval Islamic Law* (Brill: Leiden, 2006), 1-20.

²⁷¹ Ibn al-Athīr. *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārikh* (Beirut: 1965), 12/137-8. C.f Victor E. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics: The Social Factor* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 10.

²⁷² Jacques, *Authority, Conflict and Transmission*, 9-11. Anjum, *Politics, law and community*, 175.

²⁷³ Ismā'īl, Ibn Kathīr. *al-Bidāya wa al-Nihāya*, 18 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Rayyān li al-Turāth, 1408/1998). See also Anjum, *Politics, law and community*, 176. ("For Ibn Kathīr, his own time coincided with the end of time.") Jacques, *Authority, Conflict and Transmission*, 4. The most important Western work on Ibn Kathīr is Henri Laoust, "Ibn Kathir Historien", *Arabica* 2:1 (1955); 42-88. Against this, Bulliet writes that for those far away from the central Muslim heartlands of the Middle East did not share such a negative outlook. Richard Bulliet, *Islam: View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 6-10.

²⁷⁴ See for example Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī. *Inbā' al-ghumr bi-anbā' al-'umr*, ed. Ḥasan Habashī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Lajnat Ihyā al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1969).

²⁷⁵ The secondary literature on the life and work of Ibn Taymiyya is extensive. See the classic work by Henri Laoust; *Essai sur les Doctrines sociales et Politiques de Takī-d-Dīn Ahmad b. Taymīya* (Recherches d'Archéologie, de Philologie et

among the most important medieval thinkers for modern Islamic discourses given his influence upon contemporary *salafī* and Wahhābī trends.²⁷⁶ Yet Ibn Taymiyya is a product of a very different cultural and political milieu than his contemporary readers. Born five years after the Mongol destruction of Baghdad, in 1263, Ibn Taymiyya fled the Mongol advances as a child before settling in the relative safety of Damascus, then a centre of Ḥanbalī thought.²⁷⁷ A precocious student, he taught Qur’anic interpretation in the Umayyad mosque in Damascus shortly after the death of his father, in 1284, aged just twenty-one.²⁷⁸ His first written treatise, *Manāsik al-Ḥajj* (Rituals of Pilgrimage) is dated to 1292 and concerns the correct performance of the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca. Ibn Taymiyya here raises themes that continue across all later works: the worship of God alone, strict adherence to the practices of the Prophet and companions (*salaf*) and avoidance of unlawful innovation (*bid‘a*) in religion.²⁷⁹ The Mongol threat remained throughout his life and Ibn Taymiyya performed a range of roles including that of diplomat, propagandist and even fighter in defence of the Mamlūks against three separate Mongol incursions, between 1299 and 1303.²⁸⁰ Relations with the Mamlūk authorities, however, were complex. While enjoying periods of favour, it is well documented that Ibn Taymiyya spent much of his adult life in prison due to his seemingly heterodox views.²⁸¹ His famously difficult, even cantankerous personality was also a source of opposition among scholarly and political elites.²⁸² Yet the historical records clearly point to a forceful, charismatic personality. His biographer, Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī (d. 1343), gives the following account of Ibn Taymiyya’s time in prison:

When he entered prison, he found prisoners busy whiling away the time with various kinds of games such as chess, backgammon and such like that lead to neglecting ritual prayers. The shaykh rebuked them for that in the strongest terms and commanded them to perform the ritual prayer...He taught them what they needed to know of the *sunna*...He roused them to perform good deeds...Busy with learning and

d’Histoire, Cairo: Imprimerie de l’Institut français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1939). In Arabic, see M. Abū Zahrā, *Ibn Taymiyya: Hayātuhu wa-‘Asru-hu wa-fiqhu-hu* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1952) and ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad, *Al-Birzālī. Al-Jāmi’ li-ṣiṣāt Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah khilāl sab‘at qurūn*, ed. M. ‘Uzayr Shams and M. al-‘Imrān (Mecca: Dār ‘Ālam al-Fawā’id, 1420H). For English works, see Makari, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Ethics*, 1-33. Yousef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed. ‘Introduction’ in Rapoport and Ahmed, ed. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-15. For a timeline of key events in Ibn Taymiyya’s life; Yahya Michot, *Muslims Under non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford/London: Interface Publications, 2006), 149-69.

²⁷⁶ For an overview of the influence of Ibn Taymiyya upon contemporary *salafī* trends. See Mona Hassan, ‘Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations of a Medieval Scholar: Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyya’, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 338-367.

²⁷⁷ The following autobiographical sketch is drawn largely from the recent critical introduction to Ibn Taymiyya by Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2019), 5-41.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-19.

²⁸¹ On Ibn Taymiyya’s frequent trials before the political authorities of his time, Sherman A. Jackson, ‘Ibn Taymiyya on Trial in Damascus’; *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39:1 (1994); 41-85. Hasan Qasim Murad. ‘Ibn Taymiyya on Trial: a narrative account of his Mihān’, *Islamic Studies* 18:1 (1979), 1-32. D. Little, ‘The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (1973); 4.

²⁸² On Ibn Taymiyya’s difficult personality, see the classic article by D. Little, ‘Did Ibn Taymiyya have a screw loose?’, *Studia Islamica* 1:41 (1975); 93-111. The medieval historian and contemporary Shams al-dīn al-Dhahhabī (d.1284) was famously ambivalent towards Ibn Taymiyya, praising his intelligence while critical of his arrogance, insolence and endless polemics with scholars. See Caterina Bori, ‘A new source for the biography of Ibn Taymiyya’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67:3 (2004); 321-348.

religion, the prison turned out to be better than (Sufi) prayer rooms, hospices, lodges and religious schools. When prisoners were released, many of them chose to remain by his side.²⁸³

In a similar vein, we read of his raiding wine taverns in Damascus in an attempt to enact religious reform in society.²⁸⁴ Ibn Taymiyya eventually died in prison, in 1328, ostensibly due to his criticism of the popular custom of grave visitation (*ziyāra*). This topic is addressed in detail later in the chapter.

Ibn Taymiyya responds to the chaos of his age with neither the self-criticism of an-Nawawī nor the apocalypticism of Ibn Kathīr. Rather, he responds by articulating a project of wholesale reform of Muslim thought and practice, at the heart of which lies a return to what he considers the original teachings of the Qur'an, *sunna* and practice of the first three generations, known as the *salaf*. In a typical passage, he writes:

How well did Mālik observe; 'later Islam can only approve of what early Islam did approve.' But whenever nations relaxed in their adherence to the tenets of their prophets and became deficient in their faith, they invariably replaced these tenets for what they themselves originated, such as unlawful innovation (*bid'a*) and *shirk*.²⁸⁵

Ibn Taymiyya describes the earliest generations as the "golden age" of Islam.²⁸⁶ His reading of the beliefs and practices found in the original sources are the measure for all subsequent Muslim thought and practice. As Walid Saleh notes, the superiority of the *salaf* over the later tradition is offered less as an argument throughout Ibn Taymiyya, more as a self-evident principle.²⁸⁷

This attempt to retrieve the original teachings of the Qur'an and *sunna*, as he understands them, against later developments in Islamic thought often brought Ibn Taymiyya into conflict with scholarly and political authorities. His rejection of the process of triple-divorce, for example, whereby a husband could unilaterally divorce his wife in one sitting, went against the consensus of each of the four legal schools, including his own Ḥanbalī school.²⁸⁸ Yet we need to stress that, for Ibn Taymiyya, his rulings were not conceived as new. They were a retrieval of the earliest, and hence correct, ruling of the Qur'an and *sunna* that had been lost, buried under layers of tradition. This conviction underpins his entire epistemology. As Rapoport and Ahmed note:

Although Ibn Taymiyya's views represent a radical break from the theological traditions of his time, he does not see them as novel. Rather, he sees his role as that of...peeling off the obscuring layers of

²⁸³ Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad. *al-'Uqūd al-Duriyya min Manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. M.H.al-Fiḳī (Cairo: 1970), 269. C.f. Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 28.

²⁸⁴ Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 15.

²⁸⁵ Muhammad Umar Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's struggle against popular religion with an annotated translation of his Kitāb iqtidā' as-ṣirāt al-mustaqīm mukhālafāt aṣḥāb al-jahīm* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 288. See also Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Muḥammad 'Alī Bayḍūn : Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2000/1426), 27/259-60: ("It is known that while the Prophet, peace be on him, and Companions were alive they were better than those who came after them, and their worship was better than the worship of those who followed them.")

²⁸⁶ Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's struggle*, 270.

²⁸⁷ Walid Saleh, 'Ibn Taymiyya and the Rise of Radical Hermeneutics: An Analysis of An Introduction to the Foundations of Qur'ānic Exegesis', *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 124.

²⁸⁸ For his views on divorce see Abdul Hakim al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or Conciliation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 171-186.

interpretation added on in later centuries, often by well meaning theologians and jurists. The closer one is to the original Prophetic message, the closer one gets to truth.²⁸⁹

Ibn Taymiyya's writings cover the full range of intellectual sciences of his time, from jurisprudence, theology, political theory, exegesis, Sufism and popular religion.²⁹⁰ Academic scholarship is still in the process of uncovering much of the depth and breadth of his legacy.²⁹¹ Here we may note that the breadth of his intellectual interests, allied to an uncompromising wish to pin each science back to what he views the early teachings of the *salaf*, turns Ibn Taymiyya into one of the greatest polemicists of Islamic history. The polemical element in his writings is seldom absent. Across his works Ibn Taymiyya attacks all Muslim groups that he deems to diverge from the early teachings of the *salaf*. This is a wide net and includes Ash'arī theologians, philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), Shī'ī Islam, various forms of Sufism, among others.²⁹²

We clearly encounter this side of Ibn Taymiyya in this chapter. For now it is worth considering, briefly, his polemics against the theosophical mysticism of the Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240), particularly the notion of 'unity of being' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) advanced by supporters like Al-Qūnawī and Ibn Sābi'in (d. 1270).²⁹³ This gives us a taste of his tendency for polemics. Alexander Knysh reveals how Ibn Taymiyya explores this sophisticated doctrine in detail, and ultimately condemns Ibn 'Arabī and his followers for blurring, to his mind, the essential distinction between God and creation.²⁹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya describes the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī as a greater threat to Islam than the Mongol invasion itself:

Opposing (by word or deed) these (proponents of *waḥdat al-wujūd*) is the greatest of religious obligations, for they have corrupted intellects and creeds of the people, including Shaykhs, scholars and rulers...their harm is greater in religion than harm of the one who corrupts the worldly affairs of the Muslims but leaves their religion untouched, such as the bandit of the Mongols who take away people's wealth but leave alone their religion.²⁹⁵

We may also consider his engagement with Christian doctrine.²⁹⁶ This is the most extensive in Sunni tradition and yet even here Ibn Taymiyya often condemns threats to Muslim orthodoxy from within.²⁹⁷

²⁸⁹ Rapoport and Ahmed. 'Introduction', in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 11.

²⁹⁰ Anjum, *Politics, Community and Law*, 183. ("every aspect of the classical tradition, it is no exaggeration to suggest, was either transformed or profoundly challenged by his intervention.")

²⁹¹ Ibn Taymiyya's challenge and contribution to most of these sciences is covered in Rapoport and Ahmed, ed. *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, *passim*.

²⁹² Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologians Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-sahih* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Book, 1984), vii. ("he seemed best able to say what Islam is (or should be) by pointing up its contradistinction to what Islam is not.")

²⁹³ For more on Ibn Taymiyya's critique, see Alexander D. Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 87-113.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105-113.

²⁹⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū' al-Fatāwa*, 2/132. C.f Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community*, 177. Elliott A. Bazzano. 'Ibn Taymiyya, Radical Polymath, Part 2: Intellectual Contributions', *Religion Compass* 9/4 (2015), 119.

²⁹⁶ For an overview of Ibn Taymiyya's approach to Christianity, see David Thomas. 'Apologetic and Polemic in the Letter from Cyprus and Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ' in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 247-269. Also Jon Hoover. 'The apologetic and pastoral intentions of ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's polemic against Jews and Christians'. *Muslim World* 100:4 (2010); 476-489. On the parallels between Ibn 'Arabī and Christianity in Ibn Taymiyya, see Knysh, *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition*, 95-100.

²⁹⁷ Thomas, 'Apologetic and Polemic', 255-8. ("(his work on Christianity is) as much an exposition and defense of correct Islamic belief as it is a response and refutation...he is not only engaging (with Christian thought), but rather taking the

He uses Christianity as a trope for intra-Muslim polemic. Ibn Taymiyya condemns Christian beliefs in the divinity of Jesus, for example, before quickly noting parallels within Islam, such as Shī‘ī veneration of the Imams.²⁹⁸ As we will see, the notion of Christian influence lying beneath Muslim engagement in *shirk* runs throughout his critique of the cult of Muslim saints.

Ibn Taymiyya in recent scholarship

It is hard to date many of Ibn Taymiyya’s works with precision, making it difficult to trace any development or change in his thought.²⁹⁹ Clearly emerging in scholarship, however, is an image of Ibn Taymiyya as a much richer and more complex figure than that of simple polemicist and reformer. This often involves correcting the views of earlier scholarship. The Orientalist impression of Ibn Taymiyya as a strident opponent of Sufi mysticism, for example, has since been roundly rejected, even if his exact relationship to Sufism remains unclear.³⁰⁰ Ibn Taymiyya’s relationship with his own Ḥanbalī tradition was not without significant disagreement and controversy.³⁰¹ While opposed to Muslim philosophers (*falāsifa*), Ibn Taymiyya is nonetheless called “a philosopher in his own right”³⁰², with some suggesting the “shares with the philosophers the philosophical spirit”³⁰³ given his deep engagement with the philosophical tradition that he condemns.³⁰⁴ And while Ibn Taymiyya’s reputation as a tireless reformer

opportunity to set the fundamental errors of Christianity as detailed in the Qur’an....and then to show how some Muslims had fallen into the same errors.”)

²⁹⁸ For Ibn Taymiyya’s polemics against Shī‘ī Islam and in particular his rebuttal of the Shī‘ī scholar al-Ḥillī, see Tariq al-Jamīl, ‘Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī; Shi’i Polemics and the Struggle for Religious Authority in Medieval Islam’, *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 229-247. Yahya Michot. ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s Critique of Shī‘ī Imāmology: Mīnhāj al-Sunna’, *The Muslim World* 1-2:104 (2014); 109-149.

²⁹⁹ Jon Hoover. ‘Ḥanbalī Theology’ in Sabine Schmidke, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 634. (“while a few of Ibn Taymiyya’s works may be dated with precision, many cannot, and change or development in his thinking is difficult to establish.”)

³⁰⁰ The famous article here is that of George Makdisi, whom aims to prove that Ibn Taymiyya was himself a Qādirī Sufi. See George Makdisi, ‘Ibn Taymiyya: A Sufi of the Qadiriyya Order’, *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, vol. 1 (1974); 118-129. Yahya Michot similarly describes Ibn Taymiyya as “quite probably himself a Qādirī”, see Yahya Michot, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s commentary on the creed of al-Hallāj’, in Ayman Shihadeh, ed. *Sufism and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 123. For other articles that develop this; T. E. Homerin. ‘Sufi’s and their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt: A Survey of Protagonists and Institutional Settings’, in F. De Jong & B. Radtke, eds. *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill, ‘Islamic History and Civilisation. Studies and Texts, 29’, 1999), 225-47. M. Abdul Haq Ansari. ‘Ibn Taymiyyah and Sufism’, *Islamic Studies* 24:1 (1985); 1-12. Diego R. Sarrio. ‘Spiritual anti-elitism: ibn Taymiyya’s doctrine of sainthood (wilāya)’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22:3 (2011); 275-291. Thomas Michel, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s Sharḥ on the Futuḥ al-Ghayb of ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī’, *Hamdard Islamicus* 4:2 (1981); 3-12. Th. Emil Homerin, “Ibn Taymiyya’s Al-Ṣūfiyah wa al-Fuqarā’”, *Arabica* 32 (1985); 219-44. A.H Ansari. ‘Ibn Taymiyyah’s criticism of Sufism.’ *Islam and the Modern Age* (15:3): 147–56. Arjan Post. ‘A Glimpse of Sufism from the circle of ibn Taymiyya’, *Journal of Sufi Studies*, Nov 2015 (5:2); 156-187. Ovamir Anjum. ‘Sufism Without Mysticism? Ibn Qayim al-Gawziyyah’s Objectives in Madāriḡ al-Sālikīn’, *Oriente Moderno* 90:1 (2010), 161-188.

³⁰¹ Al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law*, *passim*.

³⁰² George Tamers, ‘The Curse of Philosophy; ibn Taymiyya as a Philosopher in Contemporary Islamic Thought’, in Birgit Krawietz, Georges Tamer and Alina Kokoschka, ed. *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Law: Debating ibn Taymiyya and ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 369.

³⁰³ ‘Abd al-Fattāh Aḥmad Fu‘ād, *Ibn Taymiyya wa mawqifuhu min al-fikr al-falsafī* (Alexandria, 1980), 273.

³⁰⁴ Tamers, *The Curse of Philosophy*, 371. (“Ibn Taymiyya’s works include philosophical components appropriately assimilated into a comprehensive theological image...these philosophical components are utilized to support his theological arguments and to attack the philosophers with their own weapons.”)

and polemicist is not in doubt, several recent studies point to a strong sense of lenience and empathy that infuses his writings.³⁰⁵ We return to this final element later in the chapter.

In short, Ibn Taymiyya defies simple categorisation. Exploring the full range of Ibn Taymiyya's thought lies beyond the scope of this chapter. By closely engaging his treatment on the notion of *shirk*, or 'association' with God, however, we do get something of a sense of the breadth and complexity of his thought. In what follows this chapter reveals how Ibn Taymiyya engages *shirk* in two distinct contexts; first, in theological polemics with Ash'arī *kalām* theologians over the nature of love between God and man. Second, in polemics against the widespread cult of Muslim saints and grave veneration. Taken together, Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with *shirk* reveals his broad intellectual interests, polemical character, commitment to the *salaf* and, ultimately, his pragmatic and empathetic attitude towards the beliefs and practices of the masses. His writing on *shirk*, then, provide a lens through which we arrive at a much fuller and richer impression of his thought.

Ibn Taymiyya's theological project

While Ibn Taymiyya engages the full range of intellectual sciences of his day, his main writings were on matters of theology, more specifically the foundations of the religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*). He explains the reasons for this in response to a question from a student, 'Umar bin. 'Alī al-Bazzār (d. 1350). In a long letter, Ibn Taymiyya writes that he was disturbed by the rise of a range of heterodox schools in his time, including Shī'ī Islam, philosophers, monistic Sufism and Ash'arī *kalām* theologians, among others, whom threatened not the branches of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) but rather the very core beliefs of the religion. This, Ibn Taymiyya writes, forces him to focus on theology.³⁰⁶ Yet for a Ḥanbalī the depth of Ibn Taymiyya's engagement in theology was unusual. Hoover suggests this is what led al-Bazzār to raise the issue.³⁰⁷ The following passage from the historian and biographer Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1393) gives a sense of some of the opposition to Ibn Taymiyya's interest in theology within his Ḥanbalī school;

Groups among the *imāms* of the Hadith scholars, those of them who had memorized (the Quran), and their jurists used to love the Shaykh (Ibn Taymiyya) and considered him great. However, they did not love his deep involvement with the *kalām* theologians and the philosophers. In this, they followed the way of the imams of the early hadīth scholars, like al-Shāfi'ī and Aḥmad (Ibn Ḥanbal).³⁰⁸

³⁰⁵ Yahya Michot speaks of the "merciful and pragmatic realism" that pervades Ibn Taymiyya's commitment to the *salaf*, see Michot, 'Ibn Taymiyya, Salafism and Mercy', in in Ahmet KA. VAS, ed., *Tarih ve Günümüzde Seleflik. Milletlerarası Tartışmalı İlmî Toplantı*. (08-10 Kasım 2013, Topkapı Eresin Hotel, İstanbul) (Istanbul: Ensar Neşriyat., 2014), 419. See also Ukele's depiction of Ibn Taymiyya as the 'sensitive puritan' given his sophisticated treatment of popular *mawlid* celebrations, see Raquel M Ukele. 'The Sensitive Puritan? Revisiting Ibn Taymiyya's Approach to Law and Spirituality in light of 20th-Century Debates on the Prophet's Birthday (mawlid al-nabī)', *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 319-338.

³⁰⁶ Al-Bazzār, Abū Hafs Umar ibn 'Alī. *al-A'lām al-'Alīyya fī Manāqib Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyya*, ed. Şalāh al-al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1396/1976), 34–35. C.f. Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community*, 178–180. Also see Jon Hoover. 'Theology as Translation: ibn Taymiyya's Fatwa permitting Theology and its Reception into his *Averting the Conflict Between Reason and Revealed Tradition (Dar Ta'arūd al-'Aql wa l-Naql)*', *The Muslim World* 108:1 (Jan 2018), 43.

³⁰⁷ Hoover. 'Theology as Translation', 43.

³⁰⁸ Ibn Rajab. *Kitāb al-Dhayl 'ala Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābila*, ed. M. H. al-Fiqī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1372/1953), 2/394. C.f. Caterina Bori. 'Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā'tu-hu: Authority, Conflict and Consensus in Ibn Taymiyya's Circle' in *Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times*, 34.

This opposition is rooted in the dominant tendency of the Ḥanbalī tradition that until Ibn Taymiyya's time resisted engagement in theological discourse or *kalām*. We see this in works like *Dhamm al-Kalām* (Censure of *kalām*) by the Ḥanbalī Sufi al-Harawī (d. 1089) or the *Tahrīm al-nazār fī kutub ahl al-kalām* (Forbidding studying the books of the *kalām* theologians) of Ibn Qudāma (d. 1223).³⁰⁹ For these thinkers, the science of *kalām* led to doubt, erroneous belief and was above all unsanctioned in the tenets of revelation.³¹⁰ Ḥanbalī scholars who did engage in *kalām*, such as Ibn 'Aqīl (d. 1119) and Ibn Jawzī (d. 1201), were sharply criticised from within the tradition.³¹¹ Yet as Ozervarli and others reveal, Ibn Taymiyya perceives the threats to the religion as such that a wholesale rejection of *kalām*, characteristic of the Ḥanbalī tradition, was no longer feasible in his time.³¹²

Central to Ibn Taymiyya's engagement with *kalām* was his treatment on the divine attributes in the Qur'an. This is usually found under the rubric of *tawḥīd al-ṣifāt* (the oneness of God's attributes) in his works. The question of how to interpret the divine attributes was central to the historical development of Muslim theology. For Ibn Taymiyya, the Qur'anic references to God's hands, throne and face should be accepted as they are: God is to be understood by the names He has given Himself, without enquiring into their meaning (*takyīf*), assimilating or likening (*tashbīh*, *tamthīl*) them to created attributes, nor stripping them from God (*ta'ṭīl*) by way of metaphorical interpretation. Ibn Taymiyya opens his famous work of doctrine, the *al-'Aqīda al-Wasaṭiyya*, with the following;

Part of faith in God is to believe in how God describes himself in His Book and how His prophet describes him... (and this includes) not resorting to alteration (*tahrīf*), nor stripping away (*ta'ṭīl*), nor enquiring as to meaning (*takyīf*) nor assimilating (*tamthīl*), while also believing that that 'there is nothing like him'... yet not rejecting how He has described Himself... by (way of) disbelieving in the names of God and his signs, and by not enquiring in the meaning of nor assimilating His attributes with the attributes of His creation.³¹³

This stands squarely against Ibn Taymiyya's main theological interlocutor, the Ash'arī Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209). Al-Rāzī's famous 'universal rule' (*qānūn kullī*) argues for a metaphorical interpretation of the anthropomorphic attributes of God, or for delegating the meaning of such verses to God

³⁰⁹ Geore Makdisi, trans. *Ibn Qudāma's Censure of Speculative Theology tahrīm al-Nazar fī Kutub ahl al-kalām* (London: Luzac, 1962), 16. See also Joseph Bell whom, after citing from Ibn Qudāma's polemic against *kalām*, writes; "a more explicit condemnation of *kalām*, demonstrating complete disregard for its potential usefulness to the Hanbalites themselves, could not be asked for", in Joseph Norment Bell. *Love theory in later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), 54.

³¹⁰ For a useful overview of these objections and their bases, see Aziz al-Azmeh. 'Orthodoxy and Hanbalite Fideism', *Arabica* 35 (1988); 253-267.

³¹¹ See Hoover. 'Hanbalī Theology', 627-633. Livnat Holtzman, 'The Mihna of Ibn 'Aqīl (d. 1119) and the fitnat Ibn al-Qushayrī (d. 1120)', in *The Oxford Handbook*, 660-679. For the case of Ibn Jawzī, see Merlin Schwarz, *A Medieval Critique of Anthropomorphism: Ibn al-Jawzī's Kitāb Akhbār al-Ṣifāt; a critical edition of the Arabic text* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1-71.

³¹² For more on Ibn Taymiyya's arguments for the permissibility, even the necessity, of engagement with *kalām* reasoning and argumentation: M. S. Ozervarli, "The Qur'anic Rational Theology of Ibn Taymiyya and His Criticism of the Mutakallimūn" in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 78-100. Racha el-Omari, 'Ibn Taymiyya's 'Theology of the Sunna' and his polemics with the Ash'arites', *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 101-123. Hoover, 'Theology as Translation', 40-86.

³¹³ Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *al-'Aqīda al-Wasaṭiyya* (Al-Qāhira; al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya al-Maktabatuhā, 1398/1977), 7.

(*tafwīd*).³¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyya was put on trial in Damascus in 1306 for this non-metaphorical reading on charges of anthropomorphism (*tajsīm*).³¹⁵ Sherman Jackson covers the proceedings of the trial in depth and notes how Ibn Taymiyya famously refuses to seek the protection of the Ḥanbalī school, insisting that his view was not that of the Ḥanbalī school but of the Prophet and the *salaf* itself.³¹⁶

A theology of love

Arguably the core feature of Ibn Taymiyya's entire theology is his emphasis on love (*maḥabba*) as a divine attribute and the centrality of love in the relationship between God and man. The Qur'an speaks of God's love in many verses, as we will see, and a growing body of scholarship emphasises this aspect of Ibn Taymiyya's theology.³¹⁷ Joseph Bell observes:

Love is far from an isolated or minor topic in the system of Ibn Taymiyya. Related to the question of love...are such major tenets of the orthodox Muslim creed as the doctrine of predestination...and the proper profession of monotheism.³¹⁸

The immediate context for this is Ibn Taymiyya's theological polemics against the Ash'arī school of his day. Ash'arī *kalām* theologians such as al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013) and al-Juwaynī (d. 1085) had come to deny love as an attribute of God, instead reinterpreting God's love in the Qur'an as referring to His will (*irāda*). Briefly, Ash'arī thinkers denied God loves for that would imply some need of God, while also assimilating God too closely to human qualities. Ash'arī's also held that love required some form of similarity (*munāsaba*) between lover and beloved, something not possible for God. Moreover, Ash'arī theologians held that man cannot truly love God for God is, in His essence, unknowable - man loves only God's commands and closeness and obedience to God.³¹⁹ Al-Juwaynī sketches the Ash'arī view;

Among the issues on which scholars differ is the matter of the love of God...(For some) 'God loves a human' does not suggest God's affection for him, but His blessings toward His servant. The human love for his Lord (moreover) means submission and obedience to God. God, the Exalted, is too Sanctified to

³¹⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn, al-Rāzī. *Asās al-Taqdīs* (Maṭba'at Muṣṭafa al-Bābī al-Ḥilbī, 1935), 172-3. Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community*, 148-9 and especially 196-215. For more on the background of the debate between Ibn Taymiyya and al-Rāzī, see Y. Kazi. "Reconciling Reason and Revelation in the Writings of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328): An Analytical Study of Ibn Taymiyya's Dār al-Ta'arūf" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University: 2013). Also see Frank Griffel. 'Ibn Taymiyya and His Ash'arite Opponents on Reason and Revelation: Similarities, Differences and a Vicious Circle', *Muslim World* 108:1 (2018); 11-39. N. Heer, 'The Priority of Reason in the Interpretation of Scripture; Ibn Taymiyah and the Mutakallimūn' in *Literary Heritage of Classical Islam: Arabic and Islamic Studies* in Honor of James A. Bellmany, ed. M. Mir (Princeton, NJ: Darwin, 1993), 181-195. For a general overview see Binyamin Abrahamov. 'Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition', *The Muslim World* 82 (1992); 256-273.

³¹⁵ Jackson, 'Ibn Taymiyya on trial', 41-85.

³¹⁶ For Ibn Taymiyya's own account of this, see Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-'Aqīda al-Wasaṭiyya*, 39-46. See also Jackson, 'Ibn Taymiyya on trial', 56.

³¹⁷ Bell, *Love Theory*, 46-91. Yahya Michot, *Ibn Taymiyya; Against Extremisms* (Beirut: Al-Bouraq, 2010), 105-211. Ajum, *Politics, law and community*, 192-5. Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 27-9, 51-52, 64-66, 72-3, 118-129,

³¹⁸ Bell, *Love Theory*, 47-48. Bell describes this as "the central doctrinal issue" in Ibn Taymiyya's theology (p.209).

³¹⁹ For an overview of these elements of the Ash'arī position on God's love and the love of the believer for God, see Bell, *Love Theory*, 74-82. Hoover. 'Hanbalī Theology', 637. *Idem*, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy*, 72-3 and 127-9. Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 131-137 and 145-7. Anjum, *Politics, law and community*, 192-195. For a concise overview see Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazali and al-Dabbagh* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-16. Ibn Taymiyya discusses the Ash'arī position across his writings. See for example Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuhfa al-irāqīyya fī al-'amal al-Qalbiyya* (Al-Qāhira: Maṭba'at al-Salafiyya, 1399 H), 34 and 68 (on *munāsaba*). Also Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'a Fatāwa*, 2/185.

either incline toward someone, or be inclined towards...Others take (God's) love to mean His will...The most correct of our masters...hold that love means will...Once it is affirmed that (God's) love means His will...you understand that (the term) love is not applicable to the Exalted Lord.³²⁰

Against this, Ibn Taymiyya subjects the attribute of God's love to the same non-metaphorical reading that we saw earlier. Jon Hoover offers a neat overview of the essence of Ibn Taymiyya's objection:

(For Ibn Taymiyya) this (Ash'arī) reinterpretation involves both likening (*tashbīh*) and stripping away (*ta'īl*). First, the *kalām* theologians imagine the love ascribed to God to be like human love in a literal sense and thereby conclude that 'love' cannot be ascribed to God. Then, to free God of the untoward passions of human love, they strip God of His love by calling it instead 'will'. The only reasonable course, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is to affirm all of God's names and attributes equally and without modality. The only similarity between the names and attributes of God and the names and attributes of creatures are the very names.³²¹

Ibn Taymiyya thus challenges the dominant theological tradition of his time, as expressed by illustrious Ash'arī figures.³²² The great influence of this view was such that even Ḥanbalī thinkers like Abū Ya'īla (d. 1066) and Ibn 'Aqīl had come to adopt the Ash'arī position.³²³

By contrast, Ibn Taymiyya stresses the reality of love between God and man. Love is not a metaphor (*majāz*) to be explained or interpreted away, he argues, but it is a real aspect of the relationship between God and man.³²⁴ Love operates both from God to man and from man to God. On the former, God's love for His believers, Ibn Taymiyya is content to list many Qur'anic verses affirming this love. He writes;

Concerning the love of the Lord, Glorified is He, for His servant (*maḥabbat al-rabb li-'abdihī*), the Exalted has said... 'He will love them, and they will love Him' (Q 5:54). Similarly, 'Be good, for God loves those who are good (*al-muḥsinīn*) (Q 2:195). And 'Be just, for God loves those who are just (Q 49:9)...(and) 'God loves those who fear Him' (Q 9:4). 'God loves those who fight in his path...' (Q 9:7)...And as for the actions that God loves, the obligatory and preferable, the outward and inward, these are many and well known.³²⁵

³²⁰ Imām al-Haramayn, al-Juwaynī. *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭī al-adilla fī uṣūl al-'itiqād* (Al-Qāhira; Maktaba al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 1430/2009), 195. For a slightly different translation see Al-Juwaynī. *A Guide to Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief: Kitāb al-Irshād ilā qawāṭī al-adilla fī uṣūl al-'itiqād*, trans. Paul E. Walker (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2000), 130. For more on al-Juwaynī on love and will, see Imām al-Haramayn, al-Juwaynī. *Al-'Aqīda al-Niẓāmiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Anwār, 1367/1948), 45-6. For al-Bāqillānī's position, see Al-Bāqillānī, Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Tayyib. *Al-Inṣāf*, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (Cairo: Maṭba'at Nash al-Thaqāfa al-Islāmiyya, 1369/1950), 34-6. Also *Kitāb al-Tamhīd*, ed. Richard J. McCarthy (Beirut: Librairie Orientale, 1957), 27-8. Ibn Taymiyya treats al-Bāqillānī as representative of the Ash'arī tradition as a whole on this point, but Jackson points out that this may not be the case. See Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209, n. 49.

³²¹ Hoover. 'Hanbali Theology', 637. This explanatory passage neatly summarises Ibn Taymiyya's much longer explanation and analysis as found in Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 62.

³²² See Bell, *Love Theory*, 56-7 (for al-Bāqillānī) and 58-9 (for al-Juwaynī) and even 206 (al-Ghazālī). For a useful overview of al-Ghazālī's view of the place of love in the relationship between God and man, see Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism*, 42-87.

³²³ Ibn Taymiyya condemns Ibn 'Aqīl and also Ibn Jawzī here. See Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Dār al-Ta'arūf al-'Aql wa al-Naql*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Salīm (Riyādh: Dār al-Kunūz al-Adabiyya, 1411/1991), 1/270. See also Hoover. 'Hanbali Theology', 637-9. Bell, *Love Theory*, 51, 53 and 110.

³²⁴ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 70.

³²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 67-8. Also cited in Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 130.

We find similar passages elsewhere.³²⁶ He condemns Ash‘arī interpretations of God’s love as His ‘will’ as a corruption (*tahrīf*) of the Qur’an.³²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya gives the second type of love, the believer’s love for God, no less prominence. He stresses this as the foundation of the religion and all religious acts (*aṣl al-dīn wa aṣl a’-māl al-dīn*).³²⁸ Man’s heart was created only for the love of God, he explains, and this is the state of our natural, primordial disposition (*fiṭra*).³²⁹ The Prophets have been sent to firm up (*taqrīr*) and complete (*takmīl*) this *fiṭra*, not change it.³³⁰ The following passage captures this as Ibn Taymiyya writes:

This love is real. The Book and the Sunna speak of it. The position of the *salaf*, the imams, and...all the shaykhs of the religion who are followed and the imams of Sufism, is that God, glorified is He, is to be loved in His essence (*li-dhātihī*), with a real love (*maḥabba haqīqa*). Indeed this is the perfection of love. As the Exalted has said; ‘those who believe have a more intense love.’ (Q 2:165)³³¹

Against the Ash‘arī theologians, then, for Ibn Taymiyya the believer loves God in Himself or His essence (*li-dhātihī*); he does not merely love God’s commands or closeness to God.³³² He criticises the “great ignorance” (*jahl ‘aẓīm*) of the Ash‘arī view and closes by arguing that we would not love closeness or obedience to something that is not, in itself, already an object of love.³³³

Again, we see that while Ibn Taymiyya stands against the dominant theological traditions of his time, he does not consider his view novel. Rather, he presents this as a retrieval of the earliest view of the *salaf* that was buried beneath layers of errant *kalām* speculation. In a highly polemical passage, Ibn Taymiyya suggests the reinterpretation of God’s love as His will was a means for heretics (*zanādiq*) to weaken and destroy the Muslim community from within.³³⁴ Yet elsewhere he speaks more favourably of Ash‘arī theologians, particularly in contrast to non-Sunni opponents like the Shī‘ī’s.³³⁵ The strength of Ibn Taymiyya’s anti- Ash‘arī polemics, it seems, varies according to the issue and context at hand.

The love of God and the *shirk* of love

³²⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 2/227-8.

³²⁷ Ibid., 2/229. Also see Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 69.

³²⁸ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 66. Also see 37, 59 and 72.

³²⁹ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Amrād al-Qulūb wa Shifāfuha* (Al-Qāhira: Maṭba‘at al-Salafiyya, 1399H), 26. (“The heart was created only to love God (*li-ḥubb Allah*). God has predisposed his creature (*faṭara*) to love Him and to worship Him alone. When the primordial nature (*fiṭra*) is left uncorrupted, the heart knows God, loves Him and worships Him alone.”) See also Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 71.

³³⁰ Ibid. For the relationship between love and *fiṭra* in Ibn Taymiyya, see Sophia Vasalou, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79-82, 123, 177-8, 189-192. Also see Livnat Holtzman. ‘Human Choice, Divine Guidance and the *Fiṭra* Tradition: The Use of Hadith in Theological Treatises by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’, in *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, 166-178.

³³¹ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 68. Elsewhere Ibn Taymiyya speaks of God as “worshipped in His essence” (*ma’būd li-dhātihī*) see Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Nubuwwāt* (Al-Qāhira: Maṭba‘at al-Salafiyya al-Maktabatuhā, 1966/1386H), 83.

³³² Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 63.

³³³ Ibid., 69-70.

³³⁴ Ibid., 69.

³³⁵ For more on Ibn Taymiyya’s selective use of Ash‘arī polemics see Anjum, *Politics, Law and Community*, 189-191. Makdisi presents a detailed mental-map of Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of Muslim orthodoxy, and situates a range of heterodox Muslim schools and sects according to their proper place in Ibn Taymiyya’s conceptual schema. See George Makdisi. ‘Hanbalite Islam’, in *Studies on Islam*, ed. and trans. Merlin Schwarz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 257-8.

We therefore see the centrality of love in the theology of Ibn Taymiyya. Love is a reality, he insists, not a metaphor, and is the defining feature of the relationship between God and man. It is inevitable, then, that Ibn Taymiyya draws a close connection between the love of God and the central doctrine of *tawhīd*. Ibn Taymiyya speaks of the ‘*tawhīd* of the love of God’ (*tawhīd al-maḥabba li-llāh*).³³⁶ He writes that loving God is central to what it means to worship Him and to believe in His oneness. Indeed, worship of God comprises complete love for Him (*al-‘ibāda tataḍamman kamāl al-ḥubb*).³³⁷ He writes:

The message of *tawhīd*, the message for which all the Messengers were sent, includes love for God alone and absolute rejection of love for the created unless that is loved by God, in which case (this love) is subsumed under love for God. This is in contrast to the one who loves (something) with God (*al-maḥabba ma’a Allāh*), which is *shirk*.³³⁸

Love is therefore intrinsic to *tawhīd*. We return shortly to the notion of ‘love with God’ and *shirk*. For now, it is worth exploring further this close interplay between love and the doctrine of *tawhīd*.

Ibn Taymiyya does not prioritize love of God over the law. We express our love for God, he writes, by following the Prophet and obeying God’s law.³³⁹ This involves “enjoining the commanded and leaving the prohibited.”³⁴⁰ In this way Ibn Taymiyya transforms obedience to *sharī‘a*, indeed all acts of worship, into expressions of love for God;

Following the *sunna* of the Messenger, and following his *sharī‘a*, inwardly and outwardly, necessarily follows from the love of God.³⁴¹

Elsewhere it appears that what is in the heart is a more decisive measure of love than outward action. Ibn Taymiyya speaks of an unidentified Companion (Nu‘aymān ibn ‘Amr in the tradition) who continued to drink alcohol in Medina after its prohibition. Yet the Prophet, Ibn Taymiyya explains, refrained from punishing the Companion and stated; “for he (still) loves God and His Prophet.”³⁴² Love of God and the Prophet, in this light, seem not so simple a matter of outward obedience.³⁴³ Nor is God the only legitimate object of love. We may love created things in so far as they are loved by God or are subsumed under the love of God. Ibn Taymiyya describes this as love for God (*al-maḥabba li-llāh*). Love of the Prophets and all that which God Himself loves, such as prayer and *jihad*, falls under this category. This is commendable for it falls under an over-arching love of God. Ibn Taymiyya writes:

³³⁶ Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 2/109.

³³⁷ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 63. Also see 44, 68.

³³⁸ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Nubuwwāt*, 84.

³³⁹ For a selection of verses from Ibn Taymiyya to this effect, see Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 211-213.

³⁴⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 13/170.

³⁴¹ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 76. This is also cited, in slightly different wording, in Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 213. Also see Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 75. (“God has revealed the verse: “Say, if you love God, follow me! God will love you (Q 3:31)”. He then demonstrates that loving Him entails following the Prophet, and also that following the Prophet entails that God then loves his slave.”)

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁴³ This of course raises the question as to how we can love God and the Prophet and yet still commit sins. Exploring this takes us far beyond the scope of our present chapter, but this is explored in detail by Toshiko Izutsu in his analysis of Ibn Taymiyya’s construction of the nature of belief (*īmān*). See Toshiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Īmān and Islām* (Tokyo; The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965), 166-179.

(The believer) knows that God loves His Prophet and His righteous servants, so he (also) loves them because of God. Similarly, knowing that God loves that what is commanded be done, and that what is prohibited be abandoned, he (the believer) loves that too.³⁴⁴

Ibn Taymiyya points to hadith traditions affirming the Prophet's love for his Companions and wife, Aisha.³⁴⁵ But there is perhaps a problem of subjectivity here. We may love food and sleep, for instance, because they assist in the performance of religious duties. This would be laudable, falling under the category of 'love for God'. But we may also love food and sleep on the grounds of greed and laziness. The nature of the love in question varies considerably, of course, yet Ibn Taymiyya does not explore these subjectivities. It would seem that intention, what is in the heart, is key. Ibn Taymiyya is also open to the charge, he realises, that many love God only because of His beneficence (*ihsān*) towards them, and in the hope of earning His reward and recompense. This is still praiseworthy, he writes, though he calls this the "love of the masses" (*maḥabbat al-āmma*). More perfect for Ibn Taymiyya is the "love of the elites" (*maḥabbat al-khāṣṣa*), those who love God purely in Himself.³⁴⁶ This distinction of ways of loving God, we should note, is highly resonant in Sufi tradition.³⁴⁷

This leads us to the notion of *shirk* and love. The essence of *shirk* in Ibn Taymiyya's theological writings is that something becomes an independent object of love alongside God. It is when something other than God is loved in its essence.³⁴⁸ The crucial distinction here is between the love of something for God (*al-maḥabba li-llāh*) and the love of something with or alongside God (*al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*). This second category constitutes *shirk*. Ibn Taymiyya explains:

Whoever loves a created object (*makhlūq*) as he loves the Creator (*khāliq*) gives to Him an associate (*sharik*). He then takes, besides God, rivals (*andād*) and loves them as he loves God, even though he may profess that God is the Creator... This is why God and His Messenger distinguished between he who loves for God and he who loves with God (*al-maḥabba li-llah wa al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*.) For the former, God is his beloved (*maḥbūb*), the one he worships ... The latter is he who loves with God, and who therefore makes the object of his love a rival (*nidd*) of God.³⁴⁹

This, Ibn Taymiyya crucially tells us, was the essence of pre-Islamic idolatry. The *mushrikūn* associated their idols with God as equal objects of love. Ibn Taymiyya writes:

The *mushrikūn* did not associate their gods with God in every way. Rather, they believed that God was their creator and Sovereign (*mulk*), and that they were created by Him... But they associated between their gods and God in terms of love and veneration." (*al-maḥabba wa al-taẓīm*)³⁵⁰

³⁴⁴ Cited in Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 157. See also Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 63-5 and 75-6.

³⁴⁵ Ibn Taymiyya. *Amrād al-Qulūb*, 23. Also see Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 67-9.

³⁴⁶ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 77. Also Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 215-6. Bell, *Love Theory*, 82, 155.

³⁴⁷ See for example the citation of Sufi master al-Junayd in the treatment on love in al-Ghazālī. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Qāhira; 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1377/1957), 4/329. ("Sometimes man loves God for his beneficence and sometimes he loves Him for his majesty and beauty... those who love God are not found outside of these two categories and that is why Junayd has said; 'As for loving God, people are either from the masses ('*āmm*) or the elite (*khāṣṣ*)').

³⁴⁸ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' al-Fatāwa*, 10/341.

³⁴⁹ Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 157.

³⁵⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu' al-Fatāwa*, 13/11. Also Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Tuḥfa*, 63. ("The believers gave all of their love to God alone... whereas the *mushrikūn* gave some of their love to God, and some to what that associated with Him.")

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) echoes this theology of love, describing love as the “foundation of the religion” (*aṣl al-dīn*).³⁵¹ Ibn Qayyim describes the essence of *shirk* as a devotion of love to more than one object (*aṣl al-shirk bi-Allāh al-ishrāk fī al-maḥabba*).³⁵² The central dichotomy running through Ibn Taymiyya’s theology remains that of *tawḥīd* and *shirk*, then, but he expresses and understands this via the notion of love. The pre-Islamic *mushrikūn* were idolaters who, in essence, associated their idols with God by way of a love meant solely for God.

This is the meaning of *shirk* in Ibn Taymiyya’s theology. In this light we may perhaps translate *shirk* not as ‘association’ with God for Ibn Taymiyya, but rather as a ‘division’ or even ‘sharing’ with God. This is faithful to the Arabic root *sh-r-k* and seems to better reflect the subtleties of his position. But this reading of *shirk* raises a host of important questions. The first concerns the potentially broad scope of *shirk*. Ibn Taymiyya lists some of the created objects that typically become objects of love:

Many people have a Caliph, a scholar, shaykh or emir and make him a rival (*nidd*, pl. *andād*) of God, though they may well say that they love him for God... Sometimes, they treat him as the Christians do the Messiah, they invoke him and call him for help. They put him in place of God and His messenger.
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Yet there is no reason to limit *shirk* simply to leaders, scholars and emirs. Following Ibn Taymiyya, it would seem that anything may lead to *shirk* if it is turned into an object of love in its own right. Whether food is loved for the sake of God or as a gluttonous object of love, for example, is ultimately a matter of intention. Again, it appears that only the heart knows whether an object is loved for God or as a rival of God, whether it belongs to the love of *tawḥīd* or *shirk*. But there is perhaps a greater issue to address from Ibn Taymiyya. We briefly recall the centrality of loving God to his theology. The essence of the believer is that his heart is devoted solely to God. Ibn Taymiyya writes; “If the heart is not sincere to God, it worships other than Him, making another God alongside Him.”³⁵⁴ Ibn Qayyim puts this in even starker terms:

The love of God is the most serious requirement of the religion, the greatest of its sources, the most sublime of its foundations. And whomsoever loves any created object like he loves God, this is from the types of *shirk* that God does not forgive.³⁵⁵

Yet it could be argued that devoting one’s heart solely to God is, in reality, a great challenge. In worldly life even sincere believers struggle to love God alone or only that which God loves, to cleanse their heart entirely from the love of illicit objects. Ibn Taymiyya himself notes the unnamed Companion struggling to renounce alcohol after its prohibition in Medina. This raises the question of whether all believers, to some degree, are guilty of *shirk*. Ibn Taymiyya seems keenly aware of this. He recognises

³⁵¹ Ibn Qayyim, al-Jawziyya. *Rawḍat al-Muḥibbīn wa nuzhat al-mushtāqīn*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Ubayd (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘āda, 1956), 209-10.

³⁵² Ibn Qayyim, al-Jawziyya. *Al-Dā’ wa al-Dawā’*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Madanī, al-Mu’assa al-Su‘ūdiyya bi-Misr), 274.

³⁵³ Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 160.

³⁵⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū’ al-Fatāwa*, 2/78.

³⁵⁵ Ibn Qayyim, al-Jawziyya. *Ighātha al-Lahfān fī Masāyid al-Shayṭān*, ed. M. H. Fiqī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2004/1425), 2/158.

the challenge of truly loving God alone and, in an isolated passage, concedes of *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*; “this is that which it is almost impossible to be free from.” (*huwa alladhī la yakād aḥad an yuslim min*)³⁵⁶ He notes this kind of *shirk* has struck “most people” in his time.³⁵⁷ Here we see a keen awareness of the inclinations of popular piety in Ibn Taymiyya; an aspect of his thought that we return to when exploring his writings on the cult of Muslim saints.

Ultimately, the foregoing reveals how the notion of love is the central element of *tawḥīd* and *shirk* in Ibn Taymiyya’s theology. The essence of the *mushrik* for Ibn Taymiyya is he who loves other objects alongside God, turning them into independent objects of love and sharing them with a love that is due God alone. This, in effect, turns the object into an idol or to use Ibn Taymiyya’s preferred term, a rival (*nid*) of God. For Ibn Taymiyya, a true monotheist has no space in the heart to love other than God or to love something not, ultimately, for the sake of God. Thus he speaks of how one falls into *shirk* only through a deficiency in *tawḥīd* (*naqṣ tawḥīdihi wa īmānihi*).³⁵⁸ But Ibn Taymiyya also acknowledges this level of love of God is not so easily attained. We may all, it seems, potentially turn other than God into objects of love.³⁵⁹ This in turn suggests another explanation for the centrality of love in his theology. Ibn Taymiyya heavily engages a theology of love not only for the sake of anti-Ash‘arī polemics, perhaps, but also, more deeply, because of his ultimate awareness that avoiding *shirk* by way of loving other than God is a challenge for all, including even sincere believers.

Ibn Taymiyya on the cult of Muslim saints

Ibn Taymiyya’s writings on *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh* do not, however, represent his most extensive treatment on *shirk*. For this we must look elsewhere, more specifically to his polemics against the cult of Muslim saints and the veneration of graves, central features of popular piety in the Mamlūk Near East of his time. Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) offers what remains the most exhaustive treatment of the history of saint veneration in Islamic tradition.³⁶⁰ Many key features of the cult of saints, such as beliefs in their powers of intercession, the sanctity of saints’ relics, the veneration of graves or the custom of supplicating to saints, have been contested throughout Islamic tradition, as we will see. Ibn Taymiyya’s value lies in his representing the critical trend of Islamic thought. He is considered among the most incisive and tireless critics of saint veneration in Islam.³⁶¹ Some liken his views to Protestant denunciations of Catholic ‘idolatry’.³⁶²

³⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 2/109.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 2/78.

³⁵⁸ Ibn Taymiyya. *Amrād al-Qulūb*, 26.

³⁵⁹ Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 1/104.

³⁶⁰ Ignaz Goldziher. ‘Veneration of Saints in Islam’, in S. M. Stern, ed. *Muslim Studies*, trans. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern, 2 vols. (London, 1967-71), 2/255-341.

³⁶¹ We note Goldziher’s affinity to what we shall see is Ibn Taymiyya’s position. Goldziher writes that a major cause of saint veneration was the need of ordinary believers to bridge the divide between themselves and God, thus turning to saints and in turn satisfying their “polytheistic needs”. See Goldziher. ‘Veneration of Saints’, 259.

³⁶² Yahya Michot. ‘Between Entertainment and Religion: Ibn Taymiyya’s views on Superstition’ *Muslim World* 99:1 (2009), 15-16. Marco Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam* (Wiesbaden: Harrowitz, 2004), 71, n.378. (“It is worth the effort to

We must make three key observations at the outset. First, it bears stressing that Ibn Taymiyya's extensive engagement with the cult of saints reflects the popular reality of his time. Josef Meri examines the religious culture of fourteenth century Syria, exactly the time in which Ibn Taymiyya is writing, and offers the following depiction:

To the medieval devotee, saints and miracles were an essential part of life...In saints, devotees found the strength to cope with war, disease, and pestilence. Saints had the power to address injustice and exact punishment...Saints brought good fortune and plenitude, imparted knowledge, blessings, hope, comfort, solace and protection from evil. They were God's agents on earth...Venerating saints was endemic.³⁶³

This is clear from Ibn Taymiyya's works, particularly his Compendium of Legal Rulings (*Majmū' al-Fatāwa*: hereon *Majmū'*). Many of the questions put to Ibn Taymiyya are recorded in the *Fatāwa* and these give valuable insight into the popular religious environment of his time. Consider, for example, the following query that was put to Ibn Taymiyya;

It is reported from some of the sayings of the scholars is that if you have an accident, or an issue of which you fear, then read the verse of the Throne (*āyat al-kursī*), facing (the grave of) Shaykh 'Abdul Qādir al-Jīlānī and send greetings upon him seven times, and make a step towards his grave with each greeting and he will remove your need... Is this permissible or not?³⁶⁴

Second, we may question how Ibn Taymiyya's attitude towards the cult of saints links to his treatment on *shirk* and the love of other than God. His polemics against saint veneration has received attention in scholarship.³⁶⁵ Yet there has not, to date, been an attempt to explore the possible connection here with his theology of love. This is perhaps not surprising; Ibn Taymiyya seldom makes this link explicit, as we will see. We explore the strong if implicit link in Ibn Taymiyya between saint veneration and the love of other than God in more detail later in the chapter.

Third, and finally, it is worth outlining the crux of Ibn Taymiyya's condemnation of the cult of saints, that which underpins and animates his entire discourse. The crucial point is that Ibn Taymiyya views the culture of saint veneration, in its various facets, to be rooted in an exaggeration of the powers of saints and others to help independently of God. Veneration of saints and holy figures 'associated' these with the worship of God. His aim, then, is to re-direct piety away from the created, towards the Creator:

Requesting healing from illness, or the wellbeing of the family, or deliverance from adversity in this world and the hereafter, or victory over one's enemy, or guidance of the heart, or forgiveness of sins, or

read the treatise against the cult of relics by John Calvin ... while studying the works of Neo-Hanbalites such as Ibn Taymiyya...one then realizes that many arguments put forward sound astonishingly similar.”)

³⁶³ Josef W. Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.

³⁶⁴ Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Qāsim (Cairo: Dār al-Raḥma, n.d), 27/64. This older edition of the *Majmū'* forms the basis of the examination of the cult of saints and is hereon referred to as *MF*. For other illustrative questions put to Ibn Taymiyya see *MF*, 27/106, 113, 151, 190, 498. As Memon writes, “certain ideas, all related to Sufism, had gained near-universal dominance in the society in which the Hanbalite reformer lived.” Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's Struggle*, 66.

³⁶⁵ Schöller, *The Living and The Dead*, 67-83. Christopher Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous; Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden/Boston; Brill, 1999), 168-195. Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 68-92. For the most recent addition to the literature, which summarizes the prevailing literature on the topic of Ibn Taymiyya and graves; Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves in Salafī Islam; Iconoclasm, Destruction and Idolatry* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 18-70.

entry into heaven or deliverance from hell... it is only permissible to request this from God alone. It is not permissible to say to a King, prophet or *shaykh* – living or dead – ‘forgive my sins’... and other things like that. Whoever asks this from a created being is a *mushrik* with his Lord. ³⁶⁶

This stems from Ibn Taymiyya’s conception of worship (*‘ibāda*). While in his anti-Ash‘arī writings Ibn Taymiyya defines worship as “complete love” (*kamāl al-ḥubb*) to God, when turning to the cult of saints he defines worship by a broad range of religious practices. Worship thus includes prostration, making sacrificial offerings and offering supplications (*du‘ā’*), among others. The last practice here is key; both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim describe *du‘ā’* as the “essence of worship” (*mukhkh al-‘ibāda*).³⁶⁷ As acts of worship, all these practices must be performed to God alone;

The worship of God alone, without any partners, means holding steadfast to the Oneness of God Most High. This means that all the religion is to God – that we worship only Him, trust only in Him, supplicate only to Him, fear only Him, pray and fast only to Him, vow and sacrifice only to Him, and perform pilgrimage only to His house. ³⁶⁸

Yet Ibn Taymiyya faces numerous obstacles here. Following Memon and others, we should not imagine the cult of saints as popular only among ordinary or ‘lay’ Muslims, an instance of popular piety against the scholarly elite. Rather, the veneration of saints enjoyed broad appeal throughout medieval Mamlūk society, religious sanction by jurists and Sufi orders and, above all, a “protective umbrella” by the Mamlūk authorities.³⁶⁹ It extended across all strata of Ibn Taymiyya’s society.³⁷⁰ It should not surprise us, then, that for this reason it becomes the defining image of *shirk* in his works.

Graves as the new idols

The spread of constructed graves or tombs (*qabr, qubūr*) and shrines (*mashhad, mashāhid*) was perhaps the most distinctive feature of the cult of saints throughout the medieval Near East. An extensive body of scholarship points to the central role these played in the religious culture of the day. S. D. Grotein describes these as “the very centre and pivot of popular religious life.”³⁷¹ As the major *hajj* ritual to Mecca was beyond the means of most ordinary medieval believers, the tombs and shrines of local saints took on an added significance for local forms of popular piety.³⁷² Meri writes how Muslims would supplicate to the dead by their grave, believing this lent extra efficacy to prayers.³⁷³ He also points to the interreligious element of these sites; Jews, Christians and Muslims at times visited the same site and

³⁶⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/67-68.

³⁶⁷ Ibn Taymiyya., *MF*, 27/86. Ibn Qayyim, *Ighātha*, 1/183.

³⁶⁸ Ibn Taymiyya., *MF*, 27/50-51, also see 27/89-90 and 148.

³⁶⁹ Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle*, 23.

³⁷⁰ This is the result drawn from exhaustive studies of the pre-modern sources as found in Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1993), 78. (“in medieval Cairo the cult of saints created a cultural common ground for the people and the elite.”) Taylor, *In The Vicinity*, 78. (“it was in the *ziyāra*...that powerful sultans donned simple Sufi garments, the rich mixed with the poor, men mixed with women, and the living mixed with the dead.”)

³⁷¹ S. D. Grotein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages* (New York: 1955), 188.

³⁷² Meric, *The Cult of Saints*, 1–10.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10.

shared in worship.³⁷⁴ It seems kissing, rubbing and touching graves were popular practices, deemed to confer blessings on the believer.³⁷⁵

All of this is readily apparent in Ibn Taymiyya's works. He condemns the veneration of graves as both an unlawful innovation in religion (*bid'a*) and *shirk*. On the former, Ibn Taymiyya argues none of the Companions are reported to have performed any of these actions around graves.³⁷⁶ While jurists disagreed on touching the Prophet's grave, he writes, there is absolute prohibition against kissing it.³⁷⁷ On the latter, Ibn Taymiyya describes these forms of veneration of graves as "manifestations of *shirk* (*maẓāhir al-shirk*) that corrupt the religion and make it appear like the religion of the *mushrikūn*."³⁷⁸ He employs the language of idols (*aṣnām*, *awthān*) in this context. The clear sense is that kissing, rubbing and touching graves turns them into idols. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya speaks of

...The houses of created beings (*buyūt al-makhlūqāt*)...(meaning) those graves taken as idols (*awthān*) and festivals and for the purpose of *shirk* with God, as they are called upon in place of God. Indeed, many of those whom venerate graves prefer them over the House of God, and prefer their *shirk* in the worship of idols over the Oneness of worship the Most Merciful, just like the *mushrikūn* (*shirk al-awthān 'alā tawḥīd al-rahmān*)...³⁷⁹

Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya describes popular graves as the "idols of the age".³⁸⁰ As foci of popular *shirk*, he likens them to the idols of the time of Abraham and also those of pre-Islamic Arabia, *al-Lāt* and *al-Uzza*.³⁸¹ Those venerating graves, moreover, by which he means a great many fellow Muslims, are scathingly referred to as the "*mushrikūn* of our times"³⁸², again likened to the Children of Israel whom took the golden calf for worship.³⁸³

We find much the same for the prevalence of shrines, albeit with the addition that shrines reflect Shī'ī influence upon the Muslim community. Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Shī'ī polemics are well known.³⁸⁴ Of all sects, he condemns the Shī'īs as most devoted to the worship of tombs and shrines and most deeply rooted in *shirk*.³⁸⁵ It is the Shī'īs who open the "doors of *shirk*" to the Muslim community.³⁸⁶ They erect shrines, Ibn Taymiyya explains, to rival mosques and flock to shrines while their mosques are empty.³⁸⁷ The Qur'an itself, he stresses, speaks of worshipping God only in mosques (*masājid*), not

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 124.

³⁷⁵ See Schöller, *The Living and the Dead*, 13-15, 21-2, 42-4, 88-99. Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 25. Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 53-4, 127,

³⁷⁶ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/80, 92, 496.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 27/107.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 27/156.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 27/360-1.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 27/189.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 27/361.

³⁸² Ibid., 27/90.

³⁸³ Ibid., 27/361.

³⁸⁴ See for example Michot. 'Ibn Taymiyya's Critique of Shī'ī Imāmology', 109-149; al-Jamil. 'Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Mutahhar al-Ḥillī', 229-247.

³⁸⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/162, 185, 450-2.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 27/451-2.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 27/167, 191.

shrines.³⁸⁸ There are no reports of shrines in the early generations of Islam, he writes, and in explaining their historical emergence Ibn Taymiyya takes a religious-polemical reading of history, lamenting how the Caliphate weakened and the Muslim community eventually split, allowing heretics (*zanādiq*) to overpower and outnumber true Muslims.³⁸⁹ This is a thinly disguised reference to Shī‘ī dynasties like the Fatimids (909-1171). For Ibn Taymiyya, then, shrines are a brazen reflection of Muslim religious and political decline at the hands of the Shī‘ī’s. Polemics aside, we should not entirely dismiss Ibn Taymiyya on this point; historians have noted that the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo undertook an extensive policy of shrine construction and renovation.³⁹⁰

From the *Majmū’* it seems much of the veneration of graves and shrines was conspicuously modelled on the *hajj* pilgrimage. Ibn Taymiyya speaks of the circumambulation of certain graves (*tawāf*), akin to that performed around the *ka‘ba*.³⁹¹ He stresses the only inanimate object it is permissible to kiss is the *ka‘ba*, not any grave or shrine, and only because it is *sunna*, not because it possesses efficacy in itself.³⁹² But the most expressive passage in this regard is not found in Ibn Taymiyya, but Ibn Qayyim. In an extended polemic, partly cited below, Ibn Qayyim writes:

They place their faces upon the grave, kiss the ground, bare their heads and their voices rise in a clamour. They cry almost weeping. They see themselves having received greater benefit than the pilgrims to Mecca... You see them prostrating, bending themselves, and seeking favour and satisfaction from the dead... Then they turn to circumambulating the grave in imitation of the *Bayt al-Harām (ka‘ba)*... they begin to kiss it, touch it... thus they conclude the rites (*manāsik*) of the grave with shortening and shaving their hair there. In all this, they take pleasure from their idol... their prayers, ceremonies and sacrifices were to other than God.³⁹³

The parallels with the *hajj* are clear. We may question the historicity of such passages; notwithstanding the spread of the cult of saints throughout the medieval Near East, to what extent do we allow for hyperbole and exaggeration in Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim? Crucially, it seems Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim had good reason for concern, nor were they alone in expressing such. The historian al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497), for example, comments that those wishing to perform the *hajj* would circle the grave of the saint Fātima al-‘Ābida al-Mūsailiyya seven times, believing this would enable them to perform the *hajj* that year.³⁹⁴ Al-Suyūfī (d. 1505) describes the veneration of graves in his time as “a kind of innovated *hajj* “(*wa hadhā naw’ min al- hajj al-mubtad’a*).³⁹⁵ Al-Mustawfī (d. 1239) comments that

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 27/450, 251.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 27/466.

³⁹⁰ Schöller, *The Living and the Dead in Islam*, 29-32. Shoshan, *Popular Culture*, 95, n. 161. Caroline Williams, ‘The Cult of ‘Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo, Part II: The Mausolea’, *Muqarnas* 3 (1985), 57. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi‘is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 163-184. D M. Donaldson, *Shi‘ite Religion: A History of Islam in Persia and Iraq* (London: Luzak & Company, 1933), 24. Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A study of the devotional aspects of Ashura in Twelver Shi‘ism* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 180-96.

³⁹¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/10.

³⁹² Ibid., 27/80.

³⁹³ Ibn Qayyim, *Ighāthah*, 1/220. Compare my translation with that cited in Meri, *In the Cult of Saints*, 135-138.

³⁹⁴ Al-Sakhāwī, Nūr al-Dīn Abū Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Aḥmad ibn ‘Umar ibn Khalaf ibn Maḥmūd. *Al-Tuḥfat al-Ahbāb wa bughyat al-tullāb fī al-khitāt wa al-mazārāt wa al-tarajim wa al-biqā’ al-mubārakāt* (Cairo: 1937), 251. See Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 70.

³⁹⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, al- Suyūfī, *Al-Amr bi-al-Ittibā’ wa-al-Nahy ‘an al-Ibtidā’*, ed. M. H. Salmān (al-Dammām, 1990), 183. C.f. Meri, *In the Cult of Saints*, 137.

many Iraqi's venerated the grave of a local saint especially around the time of the *hajj* in Mecca.³⁹⁶ Notwithstanding a clear sense of hostility and polemics, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim's reflect concerns around grave veneration that reverberate across the medieval sources.

The visitation of graves and shrines (*ziyāra*)

The act of journeying to visit the graves of saints and prophets was a key feature of the cult of saints in Ibn Taymiyya's time. This popular custom was, and still is, known as *ziyāra* (visitation) or *ziyārat al-qubūr* (visiting of graves). Visiting the graves of the righteous is not new to Islamic tradition, as references in hadith collections suggest.³⁹⁷ Yet by Ibn Taymiyya's time this had become a key expression of popular piety.³⁹⁸ We have a wealth of scholarship indicating how certain beliefs underpinned and defined the *ziyāra*, including the notion that supplication was more likely answered by graves, that divine blessings or rewards are tied to certain graves and, lastly, that the saintly dead could answer prayers or intercede with God.³⁹⁹ Again, we readily glean this from Ibn Taymiyya's works. To cite just one example, Ibn Taymiyya is asked;

As for those whom are called 'visitors' (*al-zā'irīn*) to the graves of prophets and saints, like the grave of (Abraham) the Friend of God, those whom come to the tomb, kiss it and support its upkeep... Is this what God and His messenger have ordered or not? Is there reward in this or not? And is this from the religion that God praise be to Him sent to His prophet – peace be on him – or not?⁴⁰⁰

Ibn Taymiyya extensively engages the *ziyāra* as part of a broader critical treatment on the cult of saints. Numerous scholars claim that Ibn Taymiyya indiscriminately opposes the custom of *ziyāra*.⁴⁰¹ This is a common misreading, with his actual position far more complex. Ibn Taymiyya does not oppose the *ziyāra* altogether, and the defensive tone in his writings suggests a great sensitivity to the charge:

If the visitor to the Prophet's mosque visits the grave of the Prophet...this is among the greatest of righteous acts and in nothing of mine or others works is there a prohibition of that. Nor did I deny the permissibility of visiting the graves of prophets and saints, or the graves of others. Rather, I mentioned in many places the desirability (*istiḥbāb*) of visiting graves as the Prophet, God's peace and blessings be upon him, used to visit the people of *Baqī* and the martyrs of '*Uhud*'.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁶ Ibn al-Mustawfī. *Tārīkh Irbil al-musammā Nabahat al-Balad al-Khāmil bi-Man Warada Min al-Amāthil*, ed. S. al-Saqqar (Baghdad, 1980), 1/54.

³⁹⁷ For a full list of the range and diversity of relevant hadith material, with commentary, see Bernánek and Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves*, 21-25.

³⁹⁸ Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 62. ("the *ziyāra* was) the central activity defining the cult of Muslim saints in the later Middle Ages.")

³⁹⁹ Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 74, 90, 139, 147, 164. Schöller, *The Living and the Dead*, 21-25, 48-54, 56-59, 85-88, 115-122, 159-167. Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 75, 80, 126-127, 165-6, 174, 180, 190, 210, 208-210, 213, 216, 220.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/106.

⁴⁰¹ See Khaliq Nizami, 'The Impact of Ibn Taymiyyah on South Asia', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990), 123 ("Ibn Taymiyya) considered illegal all journeys undertaken to visit shrines"). Also see Richard Martin, Mark R Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 123 ("he was imprisoned for having issued a fatwa...which held that the Sharia forbids the visiting of the tombs of saints and prophets – a popular practice in Muslim, Christian and other Middle Eastern religious communities.") Al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law*, 20 ("the final and most serious inquisition to which Ibn Taymiyyah was subjected involved the question of performing a journey in order to visit graves, which he considered a profanity in Islam.")

⁴⁰² Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/330.

In truth, Ibn Taymiyya cannot oppose the *ziyāra* completely. There is precedent in the hadith narrations, he acknowledges, for some kind of *ziyāra*. The Prophet is reported to have said; ‘visit the graves, they will remind you of the Hereafter’.⁴⁰³ Other reports speak of the Prophet overturning an initial ban on *ziyāra*.⁴⁰⁴ Ibn Taymiyya even casts himself a moderate on the issue, noting how some figures, including al-Bukhārī (d. 870), opposed all forms of *ziyāra*.⁴⁰⁵ While he may sympathise with this view, as we see shortly, Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges that *ziyāra* has at least some basis in the tradition. To oppose the *ziyāra* altogether, in short, is to oppose the *salaf* itself.

Lawful and unlawful *ziyāra*

Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes legal *ziyāra* (*ziyāra shar‘iyya*) from innovative *ziyāra* (*ziyāra bid‘iyya*).⁴⁰⁶ He also calls these ‘the visitation of the people of *tawhīd*’ (*ziyārat ahl al-tawhīd*) and ‘the visitation of the people of *shirk*’ (*ziyārat ahl al-shirk*).⁴⁰⁷ Legal *ziyāra* is that performed according to his reading of the *sunna*. Here, the visitor greets the dead, prays to God for their forgiveness and is reminded of the Hereafter. This is just like that performed in the Muslim funeral prayer (*janāza*).⁴⁰⁸ This is the extent of legal *ziyāra*, however. The central point here is that nothing is seen to compromise the sole of worship of God, nor turn the dead into an object of worship.

Polemics against *ziyāra bid‘iyya* are, by contrast, a major theme. Ibn Taymiyya explains the term *ziyāra* in his time invariably meant the unlawful kind.⁴⁰⁹ In general, the *ziyāra bid‘iyya* applied to any visitation not in line with the *sunna*. Yet unlawful *ziyāra* was itself a varied phenomenon. Ibn Taymiyya speaks of three distinct types of *ziyāra bid‘iyya*, in descending order of repugnance. First, we have the *ziyāra bid‘iyya* that involves direct prayer to the dead. This is when the believer visits the grave to pray directly to the dead, without recourse to God. This is the most grievous form of *shirk*. Ibn Taymiyya writes:

As for the one who comes to a grave of a prophet or a righteous person...and asks his need from him such as asking him to end his illness...or fulfil his debt, or take vengeance from his enemy, or to heal him, his family or his beast and what is like this, from those matters that none but God, the Mighty and Majestic has power over, then this is clear *shirk* (*shirk sarīh*), it is obligatory that his repentance be sought, or he is (to be) killed.⁴¹⁰

The reference to death is presumably for apostasy: praying directly to the dead means one has left the religion of Islam entirely.⁴¹¹ The issue of *takfīr* or excommunication in Ibn Taymiyya’s thought, or more specifically the various ways of reading him on the issue, is explored in detail in the next chapter. The second category of unlawful *ziyāra* involves visiting graves with the express purpose of seeking the

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 27/119, 319, 377.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 27/330.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 27/375-6.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 27/13, 30, 70-71, 92-93, 119-120, 164-165, 235, 245, 340, 376, 378, 380.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 27/490.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 27/379, 448, 502.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 27/343, 375.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 27/72. See also *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwa*, 1/28 and 1/134 where he describes the performer of these acts as a “*kāfir mushrik*”.

⁴¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/233-34, 238, 328. For a discussion on Ibn Taymiyya and *takfīr*, see Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 231-234.

intercession of the dead with God. Schöller and Heck describe this as a major factor behind participation in the *ziyāra*.⁴¹² Ibn Taymiyya writes:

If he says, "I ask him so that he that he may intercede with God for me, because he is closer to God than me... And I seek a means to God through him, just as a means to the ruler is sought through his special counsel and helpers" - this is from the actions of the *mushrikūn* and Christians, for they claim to take priests and rabbis as intercessors, who intercede for them in their requests, and God informs us of the *mushrikūn* that they said, "We do not worship them except that they bring us closer to God." (Q 39:3)⁴¹³

Ibn Taymiyya thus condemns this as *shirk* and likens it to the Meccan opponents of the Prophet, known as the *mushrikūn*, and Christian practices. We explore later in the chapter how Ibn Taymiyya also speaks of intercession in the sense of reflecting an excessive love with God (*al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*).

The permissibility of seeking the intercession of prophets and saints, as opposed to directly addressing God alone, is of course a key issue in Islamic theological tradition. Its importance is gleaned by its many theological terms; *shafā'a*, *tawassul*, *wasā'ita*. The Qur'an itself seems ambiguous; while several verses reject the idea of intercession with God,⁴¹⁴ others support the idea for those given permission by God.⁴¹⁵ Within classical Sunni tradition, Khaled el Rouayeb notes how most medieval Sunni thinkers affirmed the legitimacy of seeking the intercession of prophets and saints.⁴¹⁶ Ibn Taymiyya rejects this dominant position, however, and proscribes seeking intercession from dead saints or prophets, including even the Prophet himself. He affirms the Prophet's eschatological intercession, affirmed by hadith narrations, wherein Muhammad intercedes on behalf of Muslim sinners in the Day of Judgment.⁴¹⁷ But this marks the limit of his reading. While some hadiths have the Companions imploring the Prophet for intercession while he was alive, Ibn Taymiyya stresses this stopped after his death.⁴¹⁸ For Ibn Taymiyya, the prophets are intermediaries only in terms of conveying God's commands; they are not intermediaries in any aspect of worship. He writes:

The Prophets – may God's peace and blessings be on them all – are mediators (*wasā'it*) between God and His creation only in conveying His words (*tabliḡh kalāmihī*), and commands, and proscriptions, and promises and threats, and reporting what He has said of His names and attributes...they are not mediators in His creation in (terms of) worship, or granting provision, or giving life and death, or rewarding deeds, or punishments, and not in responding to prayers or giving answers to questions. Rather, God alone is the Creator of all things, and He responds to the destitute when he calls.⁴¹⁹

Pleading to dead prophets for intercession, he writes, "likens the Creator with the created".⁴²⁰ It is thus incompatible with the worship of God alone and rooted in an errant belief in their ability to act

⁴¹² Schöller, *The Living and the Dead*, 85. Paul Heck, 'Sufism: What is it Exactly?' *Religion Compass* 1/1 (2007), 154.

⁴¹³ Ibn Taymiyyah, *MF*, 27/72.

⁴¹⁴ Q 2:254, 2:48, 123, 6:51, 70, 39:33, 23.

⁴¹⁵ Q 2:255, 10:3, 20:109, 34:23, 53:26.

⁴¹⁶ For some of the medieval materials affirming the legitimacy of Prophetic intercession; Al-Qādī al-Iyād. *al-Shifā bi ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā*, ed. Kamāl Basyūnī Zaglūl al-Miṣrī 2 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyyah, 1995), 2/71-89. See Khaled el-Rouayeb. 'From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566) to Khayr al-Dīn al-Ālūsī (d. 1899): Changing Views of Ibn Taymiyyah among non-Hanbalī Sunni Scholars', in *Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times*, 289.

⁴¹⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/321, 341.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27/80, 83, 319, 436.

⁴¹⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/279-80.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27/360.

independent of God. Indeed Ibn Taymiyya states that Prophetic intercession on the Day of Judgment is reserved only for Muslims who do not compromise the worship of God in this life.⁴²¹ There is something of a bitter irony here for Ibn Taymiyya; those Muslims who, in error, seek the intercession of the Prophet in this life only bar themselves from such in the Hereafter.

The third and final type of unlawful *ziyāra* seems the least serious. This is when the believer travels to a grave, invokes God directly and yet includes the name of a saint or prophet within that supplication. Ibn Taymiyya offers the following example:

As for the third type, it is that one says, “O My Lord, I come to you with so-and-so, or with the blessings of so-and-so...(So) do this for me, or this.” And many people today do this, even though it is not reported that any of the Companions or followers from the *salaf* ever made this kind of supplication (*du‘ā’*)...⁴²²

Ibn Taymiyya’s critique is more restrained, perhaps because this supplication is ultimately addressed to God. He does not condemn this as *shirk*, but dismisses it as unlawful innovation.⁴²³ Taken together, Ibn Taymiyya engages a range of practices around graves in the medieval Muslim society of his day. He reads and condemns each accordingly. Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of *ziyāra* is neither one-dimensional, nor absolute; he recognises different kinds of *ziyāra*, lawful and unlawful, and his critique of the latter sharpens according to how much the dead are seen to stand between the believer and God.

Yet the sense remains that while Ibn Taymiyya affirms the category of legal *ziyāra*, he does so only reluctantly. The Prophetic mandate for some kind of grave visitation forces him to recognise the custom, yet he tightly limits its proper boundaries and focuses on the numerous types of improper, unlawful *ziyāra*. Put simply, Ibn Taymiyya strips the *ziyāra* of much of what made it a popular institution in his time. His general tone, moreover, is instructive. He delights in listing the countless forgeries around graves.⁴²⁴ He writes there is nothing in the Qur’an and hadith about the special efficacy of supplication by graves.⁴²⁵ It is clearly attested, moreover, that prayers to God and blessings on the Prophet reach him from any place.⁴²⁶ The following passage well captures his general outlook;

There is no benefit to the *sharī‘a* in knowing the graves of the prophets, this is not (a means of) preserving the religion...So whoever intends to bless the prophets, or believe in them, or revive their remembrance of them, it is possible to do this (anywhere), without knowing where they are buried – peace be on them all.⁴²⁷

Ibn Taymiyya also considers it unlawful, on the basis of a hadith tradition, to specifically journey to other than the three mosques of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. This includes even the Prophet’s grave in Medina: while in Medina one may visit the Prophet’s grave, he insists, but this cannot be the purpose

⁴²¹ Ibid., 27/440-1.

⁴²² Ibid., 27/83.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ The only grave we can truly be sure of, he tells us, is that of the Prophet in Medina: Ibid., 27/115. Also 27/254, 282, 444.

⁴²⁵ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/115, 129-130 and 164.

⁴²⁶ On all blessings reaching the Prophet, from any place, see Ibid., 27/16, 77, 243, 322, 384, 416, 440. On God hearing the cries of the believer, from any locations, see Ibid., 27/75, 322, 384.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 27/444.

of the visit.⁴²⁸ Yet Ibn Taymiyya's reasoning here is hard to square with the fact that, for many, the Prophet's grave was the great attraction of Medina itself, also the fact that by his time the mosque complex in Medina had expanded to include the tomb, as he recognises, thus blurring the distinction between the two.⁴²⁹ We may also note the tendency in Ibn Taymiyya to cursorily dismiss the reliability of many hadith traditions that *do* in fact encourage *ziyāra* to the Prophet's grave.⁴³⁰ As we will see, this provided a great source of criticism for his opponents.

Ultimately, Ibn Taymiyya affirms a *ziyāra* that fits his reading of the *salaf* and does not, to his mind, place the dead between the believer and God. In this, he so tightly constructs the category as to render it a largely unexceptional feature of Muslim piety. But this ideal form of *ziyāra*, quite simply, did not exist. It exists only in Ibn Taymiyya's vision of an ideal Muslim society. It stood in stark contrast with what the custom had become in the Mamlūk society of his day.

The threat of Christianity

We should not overlook the inter-religious element of Ibn Taymiyya's critique. This runs throughout his polemic. Josef Meri and others shed light on the considerable inter-religious, even syncretistic, flavour of the cult of saints in medieval Syria. This is perhaps not surprising: experiences of death, loss and the remembrance of saintly dead are of course not exclusive to Muslims.⁴³¹ The veneration of saints seems to have clearly cut across confessional lines. Meri paints the following picture;

Jews, Muslims and Christians interacted, commented on each others piety, employed similar rituals and venerated their holy dead...a form of *communitas* existed among devotees of different faiths when they formed friendships...as they worshipped God, venerated saints and partook in celebrations...Fundamental rituals, such as making votive offerings, lighting candles, prostrating before or kissing a shrine were not expressly pagan, Jewish, Christian, or Muslim...Moreover, the veneration of prophets was of universal appeal as evidenced by shrines were Muslims, Jews and Christians at times collectively worshipped.⁴³²

While no doubt attractive to modern liberal sensibilities, for Ibn Taymiyya this inter-religious environment threatened the purity and superiority of the Muslim community. He devotes an entire work, the *Iqtidā' al-Ṣirāt al-Mustaqīm Mukhālafat aṣḥāb al-Jahīm* (Necessity of the Straight Path against the People of Hellfire), to call for complete religious and social dissimilarity between Muslims and non-Muslims.⁴³³ We have briefly touched on Ibn Taymiyya's use of Christianity as a trope for intra-Muslim polemic. This runs throughout his writings on the cult of saints. A repeated theme in Ibn Taymiyya is

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 27/182-92, 226-7, 235-6, 374. For this debate in secondary scholarship; M.J.Kister, "you shall only set out for three mosques", *Le Museon*, LXXXII, (1969); C. D Mathews. 'A Muslim Iconoclast on the "merits" of Jerusalem and Palestine', *JAOS* 26 (1936): 1- 21. For different interpretations of the hadith; Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 102-105.

⁴²⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/243. Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 193. ("How significant such distinctions between the Prophet's tome and his mosque were in the contemporary imagination are hard to gauge, of course, since the Prophet's mosque had by Ibn Taymiyya's day long since been expanded to encompass his tomb.")

⁴³⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF* 27/9. Also 27/16, 25, 29, 134-5, 316, 385.

⁴³¹ For the cult of saints and graves of the dead as a 'liminoid' phenomena; Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 1-20. Schöller, *Living and Dead*, 10-11.

⁴³² Meri, *The Cult of the Saints*, 123-4.

⁴³³ Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya's struggle, passim*.

that exposure to Christian influences lay behind the Muslim veneration of saints and shrines.⁴³⁴ In a revealing passage Ibn Taymiyya recalls his own encounter with a Christian monk. He writes:

Those (Muslims) who venerate graves and shrines bear a strong similarity with the Christians. In Cairo I met one such venerator who was a monk. He debated me around Jesus and Christianity, and I explained to him the corruption in all this....I said to him; ‘You are *mushrikūn*’, and I explained their *shirk* by way of devotion to statues and graves, their worship of them and how they seek help by them. He said to me, ‘We do not commit *shirk*, nor do we worship them. We seek only intercession through them (*natawassul bihim*), as indeed many Muslims do when they approach the grave of a righteous man.’...I said to him, ‘this is also *shirk* and this is not from the religion of Islam, even though a great many Muslims do it...’ When he heard this he said; ‘yes, then, by this estimation, we are indeed *mushrikūn*’.⁴³⁵

We may doubt the historicity of this account - particularly its conclusion - but the point remains; Ibn Taymiyya’s is a multi-faith environment, particularly reflected in the cult of saints, and he sees a clear connection between Christian belief and practice and Muslim *shirk*.

This also lends Ibn Taymiyya’s writings a deeply conspiratorial tone. He often accuses Christians of deliberately luring ignorant Muslims astray. Christians portray their religion as a kind of fifth legal school to Muslims, he claims.⁴³⁶ They present Jesus and Mary as akin to the Prophet’s descendants, Ḥussein and Nafīsa.⁴³⁷ At times, he writes, you even find Christians bringing ignorant Muslims to churches to seek the blessings of their holy figures.⁴³⁸ The message is clear; Christians are not to be trusted and Muslim engagement in *shirk* is directly proportional to their exposure to Christian influence. Here again we must question the line between history and hyperbole in Ibn Taymiyya. As Meri notes, “Muslims venerating Christian saints was hardly the norm.”⁴³⁹

An ideal(ised) *salaf*

The idea that Christian influence lies behind deviant Muslim practices is central to Ibn Taymiyya. Yet we find enough evidence to question this from within the Islamic tradition itself. As noted earlier, a stress on the essential purity and right understanding of the *salaf* underpins Ibn Taymiyya’s entire epistemology. It lies at the heart of his reform. In exploring broader Islamic tradition, however, we find numerous accounts of the Companions performing acts similar to that which Ibn Taymiyya condemns as *shirk* in his own time. Al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497) reports the companion Bilāl journeying from Damascus with the express intention of visiting the Prophet’s grave, for example, and tearfully rubbing his face against the grave upon arrival.⁴⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Abī Shayba (d. 849) records the companion Abū Ayūb al-Anṣārī resting his face on the Prophet’s grave while supplicating to God, hoping God would respond by way

⁴³⁴ For the notion that Christians lie behind Muslim *shirk*, see Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/31-2, 87, 92-3, 127, 168, 437, 460-2, 464, 505.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27/461-2.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27/462.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27/460-1.

⁴³⁹ Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 132.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibn ‘Asākir. *Tārīkh Dimaqsh* (Damascus, Dār al-Fikr, 2000), 7/137. Also cited in Muḥammad, al-Shawkānī. *Nayl al-Awṭar* (Beirut; Dār al-Jīl), 5/180. Cited also in Gibrīl Fouād Ḥaddad, *The Four Imams and their Schools* (Muslim Academic Trust, 2007), 277.

of this proximity to the Prophet.⁴⁴¹ Abdullah ibn Aḥmad, the son of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, records his father as having no opinion against touching and kissing the Prophet's grave.⁴⁴² There are countless other examples from the tradition. The point here is to note, briefly, that these are all acts that Ibn Taymiyya condemns as *shirk* in his own time.

Most crucially, there are even glimpses of this counter-evidence in the *Majmū'* itself. While Ibn Taymiyya tends to dismiss the many hadiths affirming *ziyāra* to the Prophet's grave, as noted earlier, it seems he cannot ignore all such reports. He acknowledges a hadith whereby Abū Hurayrah is rebuked for performing *ziyāra* to Mount Sinai, where God spoke to Moses, rather than the mosques of Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem.⁴⁴³ We also see a clear unease in Ibn Taymiyya over 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar, a Companion and major scholar of early Islam, who is said to have journeyed specifically to pray in sites associated with the life of the Prophet. This was an act of venerating the Prophet that concerned Anās b. Mālik (d. 712).⁴⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya quickly explains away 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar as the only Companion who acted in this way.⁴⁴⁵ But these few references alone point to the difficulty for Ibn Taymiyya in reconciling his reading of the *salaf* with the occasional counter-evidence that he cannot entirely ignore.

A broader reading of the evidence from the tradition, then, leads us to question Ibn Taymiyya's reading of the *salaf*. That the Companions may have performed actions similar to what Ibn Taymiyya condemns in his own time seeps even into the *Majmū'*. And yet this presents, in truth, a great challenge: either many of these practices do not, after all, constitute *shirk*, forcing Ibn Taymiyya to rethink his critique, or the *salaf* were not so perfect in religion as he idealises. Both of these are problematic, the latter unthinkable. The notion that such practices have roots in early Islamic tradition, in the Companions no less, threatens his intellectual and reformist project. It is at this juncture, then, that we perhaps best understand Ibn Taymiyya's frequent recourse to Christianity, to the purportedly Christian origins and influences of these practices. This offers him a way out. Drawing on Christianity allows Ibn Taymiyya to salvage his idealised reading of the *salaf* and explain away the origins of the veneration of saints and shrines among Muslims, even if a deeper reading of Ibn Taymiyya here uncovers a tension that he never entirely resolves.

Saints, *shirk* and love

Ibn Taymiyya therefore engages the concept of *shirk* in two distinct contexts; on the question of the love of God and the popular Muslim veneration of saints. Yet we do find occasional glimpses in his works that would seem to tie these two aspects together. These are only subtle and indirect, but they are enough to suggest that, at least in Ibn Taymiyya's mind, there is a clear link between the veneration of

⁴⁴¹ Ibn Abi Shayba, *Al-Muṣannaḥ*, ed. Kamāl al-Ḥūt (Riyadh; Maktabat al-Rushd, 1989), 4/121.

⁴⁴² Ḥaddad, *The Four Imams*, 355. Also 206, 262, 275.

⁴⁴³ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/387.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27/387, 390, 394.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27/416-7.

saints, graves and the idea of *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*. Illustrating this is the following quote, where Ibn Taymiyya describes some of the nature and characteristics of taking an object of love alongside God;

The one who loves with God...he takes him as an intercessor for himself, without knowing whether God has authorized (him) to intercede for him. The Exalted has said; 'They worship, in place of God, that which neither benefits nor harms them nor is useful to them. 'They say 'these are our intercessors before God') (Q 10:18).⁴⁴⁶

As we recall, the idea of intercession is central to Ibn Taymiyya's conception of unlawful *ziyāra*. Taking intermediaries with God, then, is both a defining aspect of unlawful *ziyāra* and a symptom of loving the dead alongside God. We can also see this from the opposite angle. Ibn Taymiyya briefly refers to love when describing the characteristics of unlawful *ziyāra*. He explains that excessive love of the dead is a key cause of unlawful *ziyāra*. Ibn Taymiyya writes:

The Prophet distinguished the *ziyāra* of the people of *tawḥīd* from that of the people of *shirk*. The *ziyāra* of the people of *tawḥīd* involves greeting the dead, supplicating for them (with God), just like the *janāza* prayer. The *ziyāra* of the people of *shirk* involves likening the created with the Creator, vowing to the dead, prostrating to them, supplicating to them, and loving them like how one loves the Creator (*wa yuḥibbūnahu mithl mā yuḥibbūn al-khāliq*). It turns the dead into a rival (*nīd*) of God, equating them with the Lord of the worlds.⁴⁴⁷

Taken together, then, a close reading of Ibn Taymiyya points to a clear if implicit link between his two treatments on *shirk*. The passages cited above act as a bridge in his thought, connecting the *shirk* of *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh* with that of grave and saint veneration. This in turn offers another way of reading Ibn Taymiyya's critique of saint veneration. It would seem we fail to appreciate the depth of his condemnation of the cult of saints if we ignore his broader theology of love. Ibn Taymiyya condemns the cult of saints not only because he deems its practices to be unsanctioned in his reading of the *salaf*. There is a much deeper element. Ibn Taymiyya's critique of saint and grave veneration stems ultimately, if implicitly, from his stress on the believers' sincere love for God alone.

Yet this is only ever subtle and indirect in Ibn Taymiyya. This raises the question of why he is not more forceful and explicit in condemning the cult of saints as a manifestation of *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*, accusing its practitioners of failing to truly love God. The answer lies, perhaps, in Ibn Taymiyya's numerous intellectual projects and the different purposes and audiences for which he was writing across his career. In short, Ibn Taymiyya writes different works for different audiences. Livnat Holtzman notes this in surveying his critique of his Ash'arī adversary, al-Rāzī;

Ibn Taymiyya wrote several works which directly responded to al-Rāzī. Thus...his voluminous *Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyya* was a response to (al-Rāzī's) *Asās al-Taqdīs*. Likewise, his *al-Ḥamāwiyya al-Kubrā*...referred to ideas inspired by al-Rāzī's thought. However, while *Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyya*...was an inaccessible text written for scholars, *al-Ḥamāwiyya al-Kubrā* was a fatwa, a legal response that was issued for a wide audience of educated and lay traditionalists. Thus, ideas that are discussed at length in *Bayān Talbīs al-Jahmiyya* appear in digestible form in *al-Ḥamāwiyya al-Kubrā*.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁶ Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 157-8.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/340.

⁴⁴⁸ Livnat Holtzman, *Anthropomorphism in Islam; The Challenge of Traditionalism 700-1350* (Edinburgh, UK; Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 316-7.

Ibn Taymiyya modifies his critique of al-Rāzī according to the context and audience at hand. This is the key point. We see the same in his treatment on *shirk*. In his writings on the attribute of love Ibn Taymiyya writes primarily as an anti-Ash‘arī theologian. He condemns Ash‘arī interpretations of God’s love as His will, we recall, and stresses love (*al-maḥabbā*) as the core element of *tawḥīd*. The essential nature of *shirk*, in this context, is to love something with a love due to God. In contrast, the social reformer and ‘activist’ side of Ibn Taymiyya comes to the fore in his polemics against the cult of saints. Here he writes not with elite, Ash‘arī theologians in mind, but rather the beliefs and practices of Muslim society at large. As is clear from the pages of the *Majmū‘*, the cult of saints enjoyed strong hold over a great many Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya seeks to correct not Ash‘arī interpretations of divine attributes, but widespread beliefs and deeply rooted customs. In this context, social and religious reform is best served by invoking clear hadith prohibitions against these practices, also their supposedly Christian origins, rather than espousing theological views on the nature of love between God and man. And yet, as we have seen, there remain traces in Ibn Taymiyya that reveal his own implicit awareness as to the connection between saints and love. For Ibn Taymiyya, the entire cult of saints was predicated on turning dead saints into objects of love alongside God. The popular veneration of saints and graves was, in his eyes, perhaps the most brazen manifestation of *al-maḥabbā ma‘a Allāh*. That this is not made as explicit as it could be points to the different contexts and audiences of his works, also his different roles as theologian and social reformer.

Ibn Taymiyya; the ‘Sensitive Puritan’

In closing, this chapter explores one final aspect of Ibn Taymiyya’s engagement with *shirk*. As noted earlier, he is widely regarded as a fierce and uncompromising critic of any perceived deviation in Islam. The polemical element is a constant feature in his works. Yet a growing body of scholarship argues that Ibn Taymiyya’s reformism is rooted in a strong sense of realism, even empathy, for the misguided piety of the masses. The works of Yahya Michot and Raquel M. Ukeles stand out in this regard.⁴⁴⁹ Ukeles explores Ibn Taymiyya’s attitude to the popular *mawlid* festival and shows that, while condemned as an unlawful innovation (*bid‘a*) in religion, he nonetheless recognises the love for the prophet that underpins the festival. For Ibn Taymiyya, participants in the *mawlid* will be rewarded by God for their love of the prophet manifest in the festival, despite the *mawlid* itself being an unlawful innovation. Ukeles’ study sheds light on Ibn Taymiyya’s ability to perceive the deeper underlying piety of the masses, the pious inclinations that lie behind outwardly unlawful acts. On this basis she labels Ibn Taymiyya a ‘sensitive puritan’.⁴⁵⁰

A deeper reading of Ibn Taymiyya’s writing on *shirk* strengthens this image. Ibn Taymiyya considers the cult of saints to be the major manifestation of *shirk* in his time, but his works also reveal a sense of

⁴⁴⁹ Yahya Michot. ‘Ibn Taymiyya, Salafism and Mercy’, 411-439. Raquel M Ukeles. ‘The Sensitive Puritan?’, in *Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times*, 319-338.

⁴⁵⁰ Ukeles. ‘The Sensitive Puritan?’, 319.

lenience and empathy towards the Muslim masses that take to venerating saints and graves. Fellow Ḥanbalī critics like Ibn ‘Aqīl took an unsympathetic view, arguing that the masses devise a *sharī‘a* of their own making as soon as the tenets of Islamic law become too taxing. For Ibn ‘Aqīl, the masses preferred free-mixing and social gatherings around graves and shrines, rather than disciplined prayer in the mosques.⁴⁵¹ Ibn Qayyim similarly explains the prevalence of *shirk* by way of the deep ignorance of the masses of the true teachings of Islam. This makes them easy prey for Satan, he writes, who lures them into *shirk* around saints and graves under the guise of worship.⁴⁵²

Against his fellow Ḥanbalī’s, a different ethic emerges in Ibn Taymiyya. The roots of *shirk*, he explains, lie not in the ignorance or laziness of the masses but in their inability to realize that God would, indeed does, listen to those as ordinary and insignificant as themselves. He writes:

And many of those in error say; ‘this (intermediary) is closer to God than me, and I am far from God, so it is not possible that I call to God without this mediation (*wāsa‘a*)’, and other types of sayings of the *mushrikīn*. And (in response to this) God Most High says: “when my slaves ask you (Muhammad) about Me, then indeed I am near. I respond to the calls of the supplicant, when he calls...” (Q 2:186). And (in explaining this verse) it is reported that the Companions said: ‘O Messenger, is God near to us, that we face Him, or far from us that we call out to Him?’ So God revealed this verse.⁴⁵³

The difference with Ibn ‘Aqīl and Ibn Qayyim is clear. Ibn Taymiyya’s explanation carries less of a condemnatory tone vis-à-vis the masses and reveals his insight into the hearts of the common people. It was the masses’ failure to grasp the closeness of God that led them to commit *shirk*. There is a bitter irony here for Ibn Taymiyya; ordinary believers turn to intermediaries in a sincere attempt to draw closer to God, and yet in so doing they fall into *shirk*, only removing themselves from God further. Again, we may suggest here a strong if implicit link with Ibn Taymiyya’s stress on love (*maḥabba*) in the relationship between God and man; that is, in the widespread devotion to saints and graves, Ibn Taymiyya was able to see the demonstrable, practical consequences of a failure to comprehend the real love that God has for his servants. The causal link between an Ash‘arī reinterpretations of God’s love and popular devotion to saints, shrines and intermediaries is never made explicit by Ibn Taymiyya, yet this would no doubt fit neatly with his overall theology of love, saints and *shirk*.

We see another example of Ibn Taymiyya’s lenience and empathy when considering his attitude towards the destruction of shrines and graves. Numerous hadith reports encourage the physical removal of graves. These reports, in turn, give way to the legal maxim of ‘levelling the graves’ (*taswiyat al-qubūr*).⁴⁵⁴ On account of his polemics against the cult of saints, Ibn Taymiyya is often labelled an

⁴⁵¹ See George Makdisi, *Ibn ‘Aqil: Religion and Culture in Classical Islam* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 210-13.

⁴⁵² Ibn Qayyim, *Ighātha*, 1/180-3.

⁴⁵³ Ibn Taymiyya, *MF*, 27/74.

⁴⁵⁴ Thomas Leisten, ‘Between Orthodoxy and Exegesis: Some Aspects of the Attitudes in the Shari‘a toward Funerary Architecture,’ *Muqarnas* 7 (1990), 16. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 182. Beraánek and Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves*, 1, 14, 73-4, 92-5, 116, 222-3.

“iconoclast” in scholarly literature.⁴⁵⁵ It is perhaps surprising, then, that Ibn Taymiyya never places any pronounced emphasis in his writings on the need to physically remove graves or shrines. Throughout the chapter on *ziyāra* in *Majmū‘ Fatāwa*, for example, Ibn Taymiyya mentions this in one isolated passage. After noting the hadith tradition where the Prophet orders ‘Ali to not ‘leave an image without defacing it, or a high grave without levelling it’, Ibn Taymiyya’s comment is brief; “this is a command to destroy shrines, not build them.”⁴⁵⁶ Similarly, the problem of grave and shrine veneration occupies the last quarter of the *Iqtidā‘ al-Širāt al-Mustaqīm* and yet their physical removal is mentioned, again, in only a brief sentence. Ibn Taymiyya writes; “such mosques as are erected over graves of prophets, the righteous, kings etc. must be earmarked for removal either by demolition or in some other way.”⁴⁵⁷ Turning to Ibn Taymiyya’s life story, we find isolated reports by al-Birzālī and Ibn Qayyim of his destroying a rock outside Damascus that had become the object of local worship.⁴⁵⁸ Yet there are no reports of his destroying any of the major shrines littered across the Mamlūk society of his day. Ibn Taymiyya is also absent from Schöller’s exhaustive analysis of the history of tomb destruction throughout the medieval Near East.⁴⁵⁹ In both Ibn Taymiyya’s life and thought, then, the destruction of tombs and shrines seems hardly a major concern.

This raises the question of why Ibn Taymiyya neglects the issue. We perhaps find answers when looking elsewhere in his works. Yahya Michot’s study of Ibn Taymiyya’s attitude towards the performance of Mamlūk military music is a useful case in point. While Ibn Taymiyya condemns this as an unlawful innovation, Michot demonstrates that his response to military music is tempered by realism. Ibn Taymiyya is keenly aware of practical realities in the realm of religious reform, and writes;

The renewer of God’s religion and the reviver of the Prophet’s *sunna* only communicates what it is possible to know and implement...One shall with leniency (*al-‘afūwa*) abstain from commanding and prohibiting things that it would not be possible for people to know and implement until the time when that becomes possible. (This is) just as the Messenger showed leniency...until the time when he expounded it. (To act) in this way shall not signify approving prohibited things, nor abandoning commanding the obligatory things. Obligation and prohibition are indeed conditional on the possibility of knowledge and action.⁴⁶⁰

In short, religious reform is enacted only as and when it is feasible to do so. Ibn Taymiyya writes this in relation to military music, yet the same ethic of pragmatism and leniency appears evident in relation to graves, shrines and *shirk*. Given the broad popularity of the cult of saints, the Muslim society of his

⁴⁵⁵ Makari, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Ethics*, 28. (“ibn Taymiyya headed campaigns to destroy shrines that Muslims had made it their custom to visit.”) Mathews. ‘A Muslim Iconoclast’, 1- 21. Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad; The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (London, OneWorld, 2014), 199.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *MF*, 27/168.

⁴⁵⁷ Memon, *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle*, 262.

⁴⁵⁸ ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad, al-Birzālī. *Al-Jāmi‘ li-širāt Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah khilāl sab‘at qurūn*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Uzayr Shams and ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-‘Imrān (Mecca: Dār ‘Alam al-Fawā‘id, 1999), 209. Ibn Qayyim, *Ighātha*, 1/195.

⁴⁵⁹ Schöller, *The Living and the Dead*, 287-93.

⁴⁶⁰ C.f. Michot, ‘Ibn Taymiyya, Salafism and Mercy’, 427-8. Michot, *Against Extremisms*, 267.

day was far from ready for a campaign of grave and shrine destruction. It therefore never emerges as the major theme in Ibn Taymiyya's works that we might, given his polemics, expect.

This also forces us to reconsider the very nature and function of religious reform and what it means to follow the *salaf* for Ibn Taymiyya. Widely known as an uncompromising reformer and champion of the *salaf*, his writing on *shirk* and saint veneration points to a more complex, multifaceted character. Behind his polemics against the cult of saints lies both a theology of love, seen earlier, also an ethic of realism and pragmatism in matters of social and religious reform. The following passage best captures his view;

The way of the *salaf* is indeed more perfect in everything. The Muslim shall nonetheless implement what he is capable of (*fa inna tariqat al-salaf akmal fi kulli shay'*. *Wa lākin yaf'al al-muslim min dhalika mā yaqdiru 'alayhi*).⁴⁶¹

The second sentence, as Michot stresses, is no less significant than the first.⁴⁶² This is the true meaning of the *salaf* for Ibn Taymiyya; the *salaf* is an aim to be striven for, not an ideal to be achieved. A close reading of Ibn Taymiyya on *shirk*, then, strengthens his image as a pragmatic and lenient reformer, what Ukeles calls the 'sensitive puritan'.⁴⁶³

Yet it could equally be argued that lenience and pragmatism is not, in fact, the main reason for Ibn Taymiyya's reluctance to pursue the destruction of shrines. This is perhaps only incidental or secondary, further avoiding an iconoclastic campaign that was never, in fact, destined to happen. We must recall the essential nature of the *shirk* that underpins popular devotion to saints and shrines. For Ibn Taymiyya, the cult of saints was ultimately rooted in the love of other than God, of *al-maḥabba ma'a Allāh*. On this note attention is drawn to a striking passage in Ibn Taymiyya's *Kitāb al-Īmān*:

There is no doubt that the basis of belief is the belief of the heart...The heart is, in this way, the very root (of belief)...The body cannot stay apart from what the heart wills. The external (*ẓāhir*) always follows the internal (*bāṭin*). When the internal is good the external is necessarily good, when the former is corrupt, the latter is corrupt.⁴⁶⁴

Devotion to shrines and graves, the widespread veneration of saints and the dead, are not the real problem for Ibn Taymiyya. These are symptoms of the problem. The crux of the issue lies in the hearts of believers; outer expressions of *shirk* only express the love of other than God that is carried within hearts. To destroy shrines and graves, then, while not first attempting to reform hearts, is to misread the nature of *shirk* and thus the means to correct it. It would seem that everything, for Ibn Taymiyya, returns to the issue of the believers love for God.

Conclusion

⁴⁶¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Istiḳāma*, ed. M. R. Sālim, 2 vols. (Riyadh; Dār al-Faḍīla li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī, 1420/2000), 1/331. C.f. Michot, 'Ibn Taymiyya, Salafism and Mercy', 418.

⁴⁶² Michot, 'Ibn Taymiyya, Salafism and Mercy', 418.

⁴⁶³ Michot may be going too far, however, is describing Ibn Taymiyya's outlook as one of "open-mindedness and mercy" see *Ibid.*, 430. Ibn Taymiyya does not support this perceived deviation, as Michot implies, but rather adopts a pragmatic and lenient attitude as to how reform can realistically be achieved.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'a Fatāwa*, 7/186. Also cited in Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief*, 173-4.

We must stress that Ibn Taymiyya's views were controversial. We find significant difference with Ibn Taymiyya in the Ḥanbalī tradition itself. One century previous, Ibn Qudāma had condemned Ibn 'Aqīl for denying the intercession of saints and the legitimacy of travelling to their graves.⁴⁶⁵ Ibn Jawzī writes of the blessing (*faḍīla*) of visiting and spending time at the tomb of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.⁴⁶⁶ Outside Ḥanbalī tradition, no less a figure than al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) defends *ziyāra* as a meritorious act earning divine reward, and also takes the notion, derived from Ibn Sīnā, that the souls of the dead join with the living, strengthening the latter's supplication with God.⁴⁶⁷ In his own time Ibn Taymiyya faced great opposition from the Shāfi'ī jurist Taqī al-dīn al-Subkī (d. 1355). Al-Subkī challenges Ibn Taymiyya's narrow conception of *ziyāra shar'iyya* in a work entitled *Shifā' al-siqām fī ziyārat khayr al-anām* (The Remedy for the Ill in Visiting the Best of Mankind).⁴⁶⁸ While al-Subkī contests Ibn Taymiyya's grading and interpretation of many hadith reports, the prohibition on visiting the Prophet's grave and seeking his intercession was particularly repugnant. Al-Subkī writes:

It is proper to entreat and ask for the help and intercession of the Prophet with God. No one from amongst the *salaf* and the *khalaf* denied this, until Ibn Taymiyyah came alone and disapproved of this, and deviated from the straight path, and invented a position that no scholar has said before, and he became a deterrent example for Muslims.⁴⁶⁹

Nor were these marginal views. Al-Subkī's position was dominant throughout the classical period.⁴⁷⁰ El-Rouayeb describes al-Subkī as "entirely mainstream" for Sunni medieval thought, noting his influence upon later critics of Ibn Taymiyya such as Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 1566).⁴⁷¹ Indeed Caterina Bori examines letters distributed among Ibn Taymiyya's close circle of followers and reaches the same conclusion. For Bori, this reveals not a mass movement, but the righteousness and elitism of the select few.⁴⁷² Bori even hints at dissent and desertion from within Ibn Taymiyya's close circle of followers.⁴⁷³

Things look no more promising when looking at later centuries. El Rouayeb argues that subsequent generations of Sunni scholars largely ignored and neglected Ibn Taymiyya until the Wahhābī emergence

⁴⁶⁵ Makḍisi, *Ibn Qudāma's Censure*, 10-12.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibn Jawzī. *Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, 1402/1982), 418-4. For his own account of visiting his tomb, see Ibn Jawzī. *Al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-mulūk wa al-umām* (Hyderabad; Maṭba'at Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-Uthmāniyya, 1358), 10/283.

⁴⁶⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā*, 4/416. For more on al-Ghazālī's position on the *ziyāra*, see Meri, *In the Cult of Saints*, 138-140. Schöller, *Living and Dead*, 24. Ibn Taymiyya was aware of al-Ghazālī's views and critiques it due to an apparent weakness of hadiths. See *MF*, 27/9, 21-22, 27-28, 139, 226. Also Yahya Michot. 'An Important reader of al-Ghazālī: Ibn Taymiyya', *Muslim World* 103:1 (2013); 131-160.

⁴⁶⁸ Taqī al-Dīn, al-Subkī. *Shifā' al-siqām fī ziyārat khayr al-anām*, 2nd ed (Beirut, 1978). Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 195-219.

⁴⁶⁹ 'Abd al-Ra'ūf, al-Harāwī. *Jam' al-wasā'il fī sharh al-Shamā'il* (Istanbul: Maṭba'at Shaykh Yaḥyā, 1290AH), 2:170. El-Rouayeb. 'From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytami (d.1566)', 289. On the prohibition against journeying specifically to visit the Prophet's tomb, see the comments of Ibn Ḥajar, al-'Asqalānī. *Fath al-Bārī bi-sharh Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. 'Abd al-Azīz b. 'Al b. Baz and M. Fu'ād 'Abd al-Baqī (Beirut; Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1977), 85. ("This is one of the most repulsive teachings of Ibn Taymiyya...because visiting the Prophet's grave in a meritorious deed...and its lawfulness is established by scholarly consensus.")

⁴⁷⁰ Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 195.

⁴⁷¹ El-Rouayeb. 'From Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytami', 289. Schöller also provides a full reconstruction, extending over several pages, of critical responses to Ibn Taymiyya; Schöller, *Living and Dead*, 76-83.

⁴⁷² Bori. 'Ibn Taymiyya wa-Jamā'atu-hu', 23-55.

⁴⁷³ Caterina Bori. 'The Collection and Edition of Ibn Taymiyya's works: Concerns of a Disciple', *Mamluk Studies Review* 13:2 (2009); 47-67; "A New source for the Biography", 321-348.

of the mid-18th century.⁴⁷⁴ Recent scholarship challenges this somewhat, highlighting Ibn Taymiyya's influence upon 17th century Ottoman reformers, yet the general impression remains of a scholar on the intellectual margins.⁴⁷⁵ This is in stark contrast to the hagiographical depictions found among his modern supporters. For example;

Ibn Taimiyah deputises the prophets in combating the superstitions of his age and the unwarranted concessions to idolatry in his times; he subjected these doctrines to such a hostile criticism that it caused a flutter in the ranks of dissenters and blasphemers... His writings on the subject so profoundly altered the course of religious thought in the later centuries that a number of reformers after him raised their voice to restore the true faith.⁴⁷⁶

As we have seen, the reality was much different. Ibn Taymiyya's contemporary popularity stands in clear contrast to how his ideas were received in both his own time, and beyond.

A full enquiry into the reasons for Ibn Taymiyya's marginality takes us beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet we may tentatively suggest some factors. It seems that Ibn Taymiyya drew the boundaries of correct belief and practice more strictly than others were willing to concede. As Taylor demonstrates in his analysis of al-Subkī, the sheer variety of hadith material around graves and their visitation allows for counter readings.⁴⁷⁷ This is, of course, not entirely absent from Ibn Taymiyya's own works. Ibn Taymiyya's notoriously difficult personality probably did little to bring people to his cause and was said to concern even supporters.⁴⁷⁸ More deeply, the sense remains that Ibn Taymiyya was marginalised above all by his uncompromising vision of a return to his reading of the *salaf*. Alongside the lingering suspicion that the beliefs and practices of the *salaf* were not quite as Ibn Taymiyya insists, no less significant is the fact that his writings allow no room for religious development or change. For Ibn Taymiyya, Muslim society can only 'go back' to how it was at the time of the Prophet, seven centuries previous. Yet history had moved on since Islam's earliest community, and it is perhaps an inevitable aspect of religious history that a community integrates elements that were not explicitly present during its earliest days. Ibn Taymiyya seems to allow no room for this. As Muhammad Memon notes;

Ibn Taimīya failed to recreate the Muslim society in the image of its *Salaf*...His failure lay in denying any validity to the historical evolution of Islam which had, away from its rigid orthodoxy, taken place in a series of brisk interactions with the traditions and faiths of diverse peoples.⁴⁷⁹

One way of reflecting this was Ibn Taymiyya's broad conception of unlawful innovation (*bid'a*) in religion. A major trend of Islamic tradition, typified by notable jurists such as al-Ḥaytamī (d. 1566) and

⁴⁷⁴ El-Rouayeb. 'From Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī', 23-55.

⁴⁷⁵ Mustapha Sheikh. 'Taymiyyan Ṭaṣawwuf meets Ottoman Orthodoxy; Reformed Sufism in the works of Aḥmad al-Rūmī al-Aqḥiṣārī', *Muslim World* 108:1 (2018); 186-206. See the full work on which this is based; *Ottoman Puritanism and its Discontents; Aḥmad al-Rūmī al-Aqḥiṣārī and the Qāḏizādeli's* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Also Caterina Bori, 'Ibn Taymiyya (14th to 17th century); trans-regional spaces of reading and reception'. *Muslim World* 108:1 (2018); 87-123; Islam Dayeh, 'Reading ibn Taymiyya in Granada; a Study of Inexplicit Citation'. *Muslim World* 108:1 (2018), 154-171.

⁴⁷⁶ S. Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Saviours of Islamic Spirit*, Vol. II (Lucknow, India: Islamic Research and Publications, 1974), 91-92.

⁴⁷⁷ Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous*, 195-219.

⁴⁷⁸ Bori. "A New Source", 321-348. Al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School*, 24.

⁴⁷⁹ Memon, *Ibn Taimīya's Struggle*, 6-7.

‘Izz al-dīn ‘Abd al-Salām (d. 1262), allowed for historical development and evolution by conceiving different types of innovation, ranging from commendable (*bid‘a ḥasana*) to condemnable innovation.⁴⁸⁰ We do not see this in Ibn Taymiyya. He offers no conception of commendable innovation and would likely dismiss the idea as oxymoronic. This commitment to return to his vision of the *salaf* may explain Ibn Taymiyya’s appeal to supporters, then, but also his marginality for others. As Taylor aptly précisés;

Ibn Taymiyya was hardly the ardent spokesman for the cultural and religious elite; rather, he was the persecuted champion of a minority position among his colleagues and the eloquent spokesman of a lost cause.⁴⁸¹

Such a lost cause is evident from the reports of Ibn Taymiyya’s funeral in 1328. Funeral processions have long been a marker of religious authority in Islamic history.⁴⁸² In Ibn Taymiyya’s particular case, however, it also reveals the great failure of his reformist project. The medieval sources speak of the huge throngs that came out for his funeral and, in an ironic twist, reveal how Ibn Taymiyya was quickly turned an object of popular veneration. Soon after his death, his possessions became relics and people sought blessings by drinking the water in which his was corpse was washed. We quote the account of al-Birzālī (d. 1339), narrated by Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373);

One group drank the excess water from the washing of his body. Another divided among themselves the remainder of the *sidra* leaves with which he had been washed. Someone paid 150 dirhams for the cord containing quicksilver that he used to wear around his neck to deter lice. For the skull-cap that he used to wear on his head someone paid, it is said, 500 dirhams! ...The people came and went around his grave for several days, by night and day. They spent the night beside it or came in the morning. He was the object, in dreams, of many true visions. One group of people bemoaned his passing away in several poetic elegies.⁴⁸³

There is no clearer indication of the obstacles Ibn Taymiyya faced in attempting to reshape society in his image of the *salaf*. Ibn Taymiyya was quickly turned into exactly the kind of grave veneration and *shirk* that he stridently condemned in his lifetime. Yet, as we have seen, the issue for Ibn Taymiyya was not simply one of failing to follow the *salaf*. It ran much deeper. The veneration of Ibn Taymiyya’s grave was ultimately, if implicitly, a question of love: Ibn Taymiyya and his grave had become an object of love alongside or in place of God. In line with his own empathetic reading of the masses and the nature of *shirk*, however, Ibn Taymiyya would likely explain this as a result of the masses failure to comprehend the reality of God’s love for them.

⁴⁸⁰ al-Makkī. Ibn Ḥajar al-Ḥaytamī. *Al-Fatāwa al-Kubrā al-Fiqhīya* (Cairo: Maktabat ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Hanafī, 1938), 2/24; *idem*, *Al-Fatāwa al-Hadīthīya* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1409/1989), 150. We should also note al-Shāfi‘ī’s distinction between praiseworthy and blameworthy innovation (*bid‘a maḥmūda wa bid‘a madhmūma*); Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Shamāh. *Al-Bā‘it ‘alā inkār al-bid‘a wa al-Hawādith* (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Mahmūdiyya, n.d), 12.

⁴⁸¹ Taylor, *In the Vicinity*, 222.

⁴⁸² M. Q. Zaman. ‘Death, Funeral Processions, and the articulation of religious authority in early Islam’, *Studia Islamica* 93 (2001); 27-58.

⁴⁸³ Ibn Kathīr. *al-Bidāya wa all-nihāya*, 14/143. For an account of the death of Ibn Taymiyya; Ibn ‘Abd al-Hādī, *al-‘Uqūd al-Duriyya*, 385-387. For accounts in Western scholarship; Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190 – 1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122. Meri, *The Cult of Saints*, 105.

Chapter IV: *Shirk* and unbelief: Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb (d. 1792)

A pluralistic culture in Islam has traditionally accommodated a wide range of religious behaviors and beliefs. It was just this elasticity of doctrine, ritual and practice that Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab challenged.⁴⁸⁴

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb had a near obsessive preoccupation with the doctrine of *shirk*.⁴⁸⁵

We do not *takfīr* Muslims. We only *takfīr mushrikūn*.⁴⁸⁶

Over two centuries after his death, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb (d. 1792) remains one of the most controversial figures of recent Islamic history. To supporters, he is a great reviver of the religion.⁴⁸⁷ To critics, he is a divisive and sectarian figure.⁴⁸⁸ This reception was inevitable. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb challenged the established teachings and customs of his time. He revived some of the earliest debates in Islamic theology around what constitutes belief (*īmān*) in Islam; what makes one a Muslim and why. As a consequence, he condemned most of the professed Muslims of his age as unbelievers and *mushrikūn*, likening his time to the pre-Islamic period of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*). The historian Ḥusayn ibn Ghannām (d. 1811), a contemporary of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and chronicler of the movement, captures this:

Most Muslims, at the start of the twelfth century Hijrī (i.e. start of eighteenth century) had regressed into *shirk* (*irtakasū fī al-shirk*), and apostasized into the *jāhiliyya*, and erased the light of guidance from within themselves, given the triumph of ignorance over them... They had turned their backs on the Book of God Most High, and followed what they found their forefathers doing by way of error.⁴⁸⁹

After a pact with the ruler Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd, in his capacity as chieftain of the town of al-Dir‘iyya in 1744, which gave him political backing, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s movement went on to conquer large parts of the Arabian Peninsula. After a chequered history, the movement known as Wahhābism remains an influential branch of Sunni Islam and provides the theological basis for the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The term ‘Wahhābī’ has since entered Western discourse as a byword for a strict and intolerant form of Islam.⁴⁹⁰ This chapter focuses on Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s life and thought. It does not

⁴⁸⁴ Michael Crawford, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2014) 12.

⁴⁸⁵ Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘ah in the Modern Age* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 230.

⁴⁸⁶ Muḥammad, ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’ in *Mu‘allafāt al-Shaykh al-Imam Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Zayd al-Rūmī, 5 vols (Riyādh: Jām’iat Imām Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd al-Islāmiyya, 1398H), 5/189.

⁴⁸⁷ For this view see Mas‘ūd, Nadwī. *Muḥammad b. ‘Abdul Wahhāb: muṣliḥ maḥlūm wa muftara ‘alayhi* (Riyādh: Jām’iat Imām Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd, 1990/H.1411). ‘Abdul Raḥmān al-Jurīsī, ed. *Buḥūth Nadwa wa D‘awa al-Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb*, 2 volumes (Riyādh: Jām’iat Imām Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd 1991/H.1411). In English see Jamal Al-Din Zarabozo, *The Life, Teachings and Influence of Muhammad. Abd al-Wahhab* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005).

⁴⁸⁸ We explore some of the nature of this criticism in the second half of this chapter.

⁴⁸⁹ Ḥusayn, ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd al-Musammā Rawḍat al-Afkār wa al-Afhām*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994), 1/13. For a later account see Uthmān, ibn Bishr. *Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd al-Laṭīf ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Shaykh, 2 vols (Riyādh: Maṭbū‘ Dārat Malik ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 1982/1402).

⁴⁹⁰ See for example Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: the House of Sa‘ud from Tradition to Terror* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

address the later tradition and movement bearing his name, nor the contested place of Wahhābism in contemporary Islam.⁴⁹¹ A growing body of scholarly literature on Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, some of which can be described as polemical or apologetic, often engages his works through the later Wahhābī tradition or a modern lens.⁴⁹² This chapter situates him in his own terms and context. It also focuses on conceptual history, examining the key doctrinal or theological ideas expressed in his writings. With some exceptions, it does not address the implementation of these ideas in time and space. The social and political history of the early Wahhābī movement lies beyond the scope of this chapter and has been addressed in detail elsewhere.⁴⁹³

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb was born in 1702 in the town of al-‘Uyayna in the region of Najd, central Arabia. The area does not appear to have undergone any major economic, social or political change for centuries.⁴⁹⁴ The religious environment was almost exclusively Ḥanbalī but, as a remote and sparsely populated desert region, Najd was not a center of religious learning.⁴⁹⁵ It is known that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb travelled as a young scholar, reaching as far as Basra in southern Iraq, before returning to Najd to start his movement in 1741.⁴⁹⁶ His writings are exclusively local in character and do not engage realities outside his milieu of central Arabia. There were no Jewish or Christian minorities in central Arabia at the time, meaning these groups hardly feature in his works. Nor does the spectre of the West (*al-gharb*) figure in his writings.⁴⁹⁷ The imminent colonial conquest of the Muslim world is nowhere perceived as Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb focuses on those within his local religious and cultural tradition.⁴⁹⁸

This chapter is broadly divided into three sections. It first outlines Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s background, intellectual genealogy and gives an overview of the core features of his thought. This section sheds light on both the style of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s writings and the early spread of his movement. The second

⁴⁹¹ For one example; Alexander Knysh. ‘A Clear and Present Danger: “Wahhabism” as a critical foil’, *Die Welt des Islams* 44:1 (2004), 3-26.

⁴⁹² On critical approaches, see El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 215-51. Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Oneonta, 2002). Simon Ross Valentine, *Force and Fanaticism: Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Beyond* (London: Hurst & Co, 2015). For a hagiographic treatment, Natana De Long Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (London: I.B Tauris, 2004). Between these trends: Samira Haj. ‘Reordering Islamic Orthodoxy: Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab’, *Muslim World* 92:3-4 (2002); 333-370; *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: reform, rationality and modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 30-67. Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, trans. Ethan Rundell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Esther Peskes, ed. *Wahhabism: Doctrine and Development*, 2 vols (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016).

⁴⁹³ Michael Cook. ‘The Expansion of the First Saudi State’ in C.E. Bosworth, C. Issawi, R. Savory and A. L. Udovitch., ed. *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1989), 661-701. David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009), 40-71. Cole Bunzel, ‘Manifest Enmity’: *The Origins, Development and Persistence of Classical Wahhābism* (1153-1351/1741-1932) (Unpublished PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2018), 226-369.

⁴⁹⁴ Alexie Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 1998), 29-63. Cook. ‘Expansion of the First Saudi State’, 675-79.

⁴⁹⁵ Uwaidah al-Juhany, *Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 2002), 45-7. See also George Rentz, *The Birth of the Islamic Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia: Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703/3-1792) and the beginnings of Unitarian Empire in Arabia* (London: Arabian Publishers, 2004).

⁴⁹⁶ Michael Cook, “On the Origins of Wahhabism,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2 (1992): 191–202.

⁴⁹⁷ Ahmad Dallal. ‘The Origins and Objectives of Islamic Revivalist Thought, 1750-1850’, *Journal of American Oriental Society* 113:3 (1993), 359; *Islam Without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth Century Islamic Thought* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

⁴⁹⁸ Crawford, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab*, 8. (“his targets were not distant Christians but Muslims in their own neighborhood.”)

section examines in detail the place and function of the doctrine of *shirk* or ‘association’ with God in his works. Noting his expansive definition of what it means to commit *shirk*, this section reveals the clear thread that connects *shirk* to notions of unbelief (*kufr*), excommunication (*takfir*) and, ultimately, conflict (*qitāl*) in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. This is rooted in a doctrinal reading of the nature of belief (*īmān*) that prioritises outward acts (*a‘māl*) as the decisive measure of faith. The third section addresses some of the scholarly opposition to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, examining two contemporaneous critiques that illustrate major trends in the reception of this thought.

An overview of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s life and thought

The assumption throughout Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s writings, echoed in Ibn Ghannām, is that the majority of the professed Muslims of his time were no longer Muslim. This was due to the popularity of a range of beliefs and practices in eighteenth century Arabia, centred around the cult of saints, that he sees as constituting *shirk* or ‘association’ with God. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb views most of his contemporaries as either engaged in or tolerant of *shirk* and, by consequence, of having left the faith. His use of language and terminology reflects this. Writing in a homogenous milieu of eighteenth-century Arabia, the frequent general references to unbelievers (*kāfirūn*) or *mushrikūn* in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s writings refer to Muslims outside his fold. The term *mushrik*, for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, refers to professed Muslims engaged in what he considers *shirk*. Thus, he often writes of the “*mushrikūn* of our time” (*mushrikī zamāninā*) and contrasts this to the time of the Prophet.⁴⁹⁹ Introducing his treatise, *Kashf al-Shubuhāt* (‘Disclosing of Doubts’), Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb describes his scholarly opponents as “the scholars of the *mushrikūn*” (*‘ulamā’ al-mushrikīn*):

(If) you realize that the path to the worship of God will always have enemies upon it, who might be people of eloquence, knowledge and evidence, then it becomes obligatory to learn enough of God’s religion so that this knowledge is a weapon with which you can fight these devils (*shayāṭīn*)...Indeed, one average unlearned person from the people of *tawhīd* (*al-‘āmmī min al-muwaḥḥidīn*) can overcome one thousand of the scholars of these *mushrikūn*.⁵⁰⁰

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb appears to reserve the epithets of believers (*mu‘minīn*) and monotheists (*muwaḥḥidūn*) for those in his movement. A common complaint is that critics sought to “block people from the religion of God and His messenger.”⁵⁰¹ Ibn Ghannām similarly describes those who deserted the early Wahhābī movement as having apostatized (*irtaddū*).⁵⁰² This gives a clear sense of exclusivism to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s works. But this is combined with activism. It is not sufficient for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb to adhere to the true faith. One must be active in showing hostility, in some way, to those outside the fold. Thus, in an early epistle dated to 1742 he writes:

⁴⁹⁹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/54, 65, 69, 125, 154.

⁵⁰⁰ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Kashf al-Shubuhāt’, in *Mu‘allafāt al-Shaykh*, 1/171. See the translation that includes the Arabic original in Yasir Qadhi. *An Explanation of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’s Kashf al-Shubuhāt: a critical study of shirk* (Birmingham: Al-Hidayah, 2003), 108-9.

⁵⁰¹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/12, 33, 36-7, 58.

⁵⁰² Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/152.

Do not think that if you say, ‘This is the truth. I follow it and eschew all else, but I will not confront them and I will say nothing concerning them’, do not think that that will profit you. Rather, it is necessary to hate them, to hate those whom they love, to revile them, and to show enmity to them.⁵⁰³

If a man says, ‘I follow Muḥammad, he has the truth, but I will not confront al-Lāt, al-‘Uzza, Abū Jahl and the likes of them; I have no obligation with respect to them.’ Then his Islam would not be sound.⁵⁰⁴

A true Muslim, then, must also show enmity to unbelievers and *mushrikūn*. This offers a brief overview of the basic contours of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s thought. It is worth noting, however, that many of the beliefs and practices that he targets were deeply embedded aspects of Islamic tradition. It is thus not surprising that he faced much opposition throughout his life. While this chapter explores two particular critics in detail, several key themes emerge from the refutational literature that are worth noting at the outset. The first is the common claim by critics that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s ideas, in particular his exclusionary attitude towards other Muslims, was without precedent in scholarship.⁵⁰⁵ In a sense, this was an image that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb cultivated for himself. In an early epistle dated to 1744 he flatly denies the influence of any of his teachers and accuses all other scholars, including those of earlier generations, of having failed to understand the true meaning of ‘no god but God’. His own knowledge of this, he adds, came in the form of an enigmatic blessing (*khayr*) from God:

I sought learning, and those who knew me believed I had some, yet at that time I did not know the (true) meaning of ‘there is no god but God’, nor did I know the religion of Islam, before the blessing which God bestowed upon me. Likewise, none among my teachers knew it. If any of the scholars of the ‘Arid claims that he knew the meaning of ‘no god but God’, or the meaning of Islam, before this time...he lies, fabricates, leads people astray, and falsely praises himself.⁵⁰⁶

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb never specifies the nature of this blessing from God.⁵⁰⁷ Yet as Cole Bunzel observes, later Wahhābī tradition seems sensitive to the idea of a complete break with scholarly precedent - precisely what he appears to claim – and fashions a scholarly pedigree for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, providing detailed lists of the teachers he reportedly studied with in Mecca and Medina.⁵⁰⁸ Another major claim for critics, distinct from this, is that Abdul Wahhāb represented a re-emergence of the heretical Khārījite sect.⁵⁰⁹ A third claim, contrary to both, is that the source of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s doctrine was the work of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). The Yemeni jurist Ibn al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī (d.1768), initially a supporter of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, writes:

We saw him to be the kind of man who knows a portion of the *sharī‘a* but has not examined it carefully, and who did not study with those who could guide him to the path of guidance...Instead, he read some

⁵⁰³ Ibn Qāsim, ed. *al-Durar al-Saniya fī al-Ajwiba al-Najdiyya*, 16 vols. (Riyādh: Warathat al-Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Qāsim, 1433/2012), 2/109.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ For an overview of this charge see ‘Abd al-Azīz Muḥammad, al-‘Abd al-Laṭīf. *Da‘āwā al-Munāwī‘īn li-Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb* (Riyādh: Dār al-Waṭan, 1412/1991), 408-422.

⁵⁰⁶ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā‘il Shakhsiyya’ 5/186-187. Compare translation with Cook, ‘On the Origins’, 202.

⁵⁰⁷ Cook, ‘On the Origins’, 202.

⁵⁰⁸ See the discussion of this in Buntzel, ‘Manifest Enmity’, 104-7.

⁵⁰⁹ For an overview see al-‘Abd al-Laṭīf. *Da‘āwā al-Munāwī‘īn*, 229-248.

of the works of Shaykh Abū al-‘Abbās Ibn Taymiyya, and the works of his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, and blindly followed them poorly (*wa qalladahumā min ghayr al-itqān*), even though both prohibit blind following (*taqlīd*).⁵¹⁰

These diverse and contradictory claims reflect the various attempts by critics to conceive and respond to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and his movement. Against the charge of representing the Khārijites however, it is worth noting at the outset that much of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s thought is not distinctive. Many of his ideas and arguments find clear precedent in Islamic tradition, particularly in the works of Ibn Taymiyya. Yet equally, this is only a selective engagement. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb ignores much of Ibn Taymiyya’s corpus and draws only on those aspects, mainly relating to the cult of saints, that he deems relevant to his own time and that serve to buttress his arguments. He alludes to this:

In our opinion, Imam Ibn al-Qayyim and his teacher (Ibn Taymiyya) are Imams of the Ahl al-Sunna and their books are the most noble of books. However, we do not blindly follow them in every issue. Everybody has some of their statement taken and some left save for our Prophet.⁵¹¹

Samira Haj writes that this selective use of Ibn Taymiyya, engaging aspects of his corpus that serve Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s project but overlooking others, reflects the ‘discursive tradition’ of Islam.⁵¹² Much of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is thus not innovative and this chapter illustrates his use of ideas and arguments from the Islamic tradition, exploring how he applies these in his milieu of eighteenth-century Arabia. In so doing, it also reveals how Ibn Abdul Wahhāb recasts these trends and arguments to emerge as an original and creative figure in his own right.

Two final aspects are worth noting in this introduction. The first is the need to separate Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb from the pact with Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd in 1744. A close reading nuances this picture and reveals that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb was well-known and even notorious to critics in Arabia before the pact in al-Dir‘iyya.⁵¹³ In one of the first refutations, dated to 1743, the Meccan scholar ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ibn Aḥmad Barakāt al-Ṭandatāwī (d. 1773) condemned the movement emerging in Najd.⁵¹⁴ Dismissing Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb as a “person from the masses”, al-Ṭandatāwī defends the practices associated with the cult of saints, such as seeking assistance (*istighātha*) and intercession (*tawassul*) from saints, and accuses Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb of deriving rulings from the Qur’an and *sunna* directly without deferring to established rulings.⁵¹⁵ Al-Ṭandatāwī also accuses him of declaring the unbelief of saints like ‘Abdul

⁵¹⁰ Ibn al-Amīr, al-Ṣan‘ānī. *Irshād dhawī al-albāb ilā ḥaqīqat aqwāl Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm Aḥmad Jadbān (n.p: Majlis Āl Muḥammad, 2008), 108.

⁵¹¹ Cited in Muhammad Amina, Nusair. *Al-Shaykh Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb wa Minhajuhu fī Mubāhith al-‘Aqīda* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983), 79. Zarabozo, *The Life, Teachings and Influence*, 103.

⁵¹² Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 31-40. See Ovamir Anjum. ‘Islam as a discursive tradition; Talal Asad and his interlocuters’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27:3 (2007), 656-672.

⁵¹³ This is addressed in detail in Michael J. Crawford. ‘The Da‘wa of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb before the Al-Sa‘ūd’, *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1.2 (December, 2011); 147-161.

⁵¹⁴ Samer Traboulsi. ‘An Early Refutation of Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s Reformist Views’, *Die Welt des Islams* 42:3 (2002); 373-415.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 391-402.

Qādir al-Jīlānī.⁵¹⁶ Drawing on the popular Ḥanbalī text, the *Iqnā*’ of al-Ḥajjāwī, al-Ṭandatāwī declares *takfīr* or excommunication of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and calls for some form of action against him:

It is incumbent upon those Muslim rulers who are capable of doing so to restrain him and hinder him until he repents of his horrific acts... And it is stated by the Companion of the *Iqnā*’ that there is consensus on the declaration of *takfīr* over he who leads astray this community. And there is no doubt that words of this man (Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb) clearly does this!⁵¹⁷

The treatise closes with encomia by ten Meccan scholars, from across the legal schools, which echo al-Ṭandatāwī. The comments of the Ḥanafī scholar As‘ad ibn ‘Abdullah al-‘Atāqī are of note:

If he is insane, he should be imprisoned, beaten and treated with medication for insanity...(If not) it has become clear that he is a misled misleader, who should be killed after being publicly denounced so as to deter the likes of him... If my own hands could reach him, I would kill him (*wa law tanāluhu yadayya la-aqtulannahu*).⁵¹⁸

These alarmist responses, from 1743, predate the pact with Ibn Su‘ūd. Critics were thus quick to respond to what they perceived as the divisive nature of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s thought, its challenge to established beliefs and custom. Opponents did not respond to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb only after he became a political force, nor is his thought entirely synonymous with the pact in al-Dir‘iyya in 1744. We find fierce rejections of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, extending to *takfīr* and calls for his murder, soon after he began his mission in 1741.

The second aspect concerns the oral nature and spread of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s works. Many of his most famous texts, such as the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, take the form of condensed units of thought, called *qawā’id* (principles) or *masā’il* (matters), and often consist of Qur’an or hadith citations with short, sparse lines of commentary. His authorial voice does not come to the fore. This style of writing is itself contested. To critics, it points to the sense of intellectual paucity in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb.⁵¹⁹ To supporters, it reveals his roots in the Qur’an and *sunna*.⁵²⁰ Both overlook the oral nature and spread of the movement. Living in an age and milieu before print, the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* and other works reflect the *matn* genre of literature, short epistles designed for oral instruction and memorization.⁵²¹ Historical sources support this and speak of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s followers publicly reciting his works amid large

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 391, 400.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 401-3.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 411-2.

⁵¹⁹ Algar, *Wahhabism*, 14. (“All of his works are extremely slight, in terms of both content and bulk.”) Also 17. (“One has, indeed, the impression that... (he) regarded the authorial act as one more unauthorized innovation that for centuries had clouded the Muslim mind.”)

⁵²⁰ Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Explanation of Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s The Four Principles of Shirk: taken from the works of ‘Abdullāh ibn Jibrīn, Sālih Āl al-Shaykh and others* (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidayah Publications, 2002), 11. (“In his works, the Muslim finds that the author (‘Abdul Wahhāb) hardly speaks himself; rather he lets the Qur’an and sunnah do the talking for him.”)

⁵²¹ As noted in Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 41.

public audiences. Michael Cook cites a contemporary account of how the masses were exposed and educated in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s ideas:

The tribes, chiefs, jurists and administrators would be present and would listen to what he read to them in the regular observance (*wird*) which they call the lesson (*dars*), and the hearers would memorise it, so that in his lands there did not remain anyone – old or young, man or woman, free or slave – who did not have it by heart, reviewing it with him and vying in giving it his entire attention.⁵²²

The style and delivery of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s works, then, indicates a concern for the proper catechization of the masses. Yet alongside this oral and public endeavor, his collection of personal letters (*Rasā’il Shakhshiyya*) reveal another means of propaganda. Many of his letters are more detailed and digressive than his published works. They point to a complex, multifaceted personality and address both scholars and laity, supporters and critics. His letters use classical Arabic and local dialect and range from calm and reflective in tone to adamant and hostile.⁵²³ They give a rich insight into the nature of his thought, his debates with opponents and the early spread of the movement. Across the *Rasā’il* Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb names no less than twenty opponents and a common complaint is that his critics spread lies and false information about him. Thus we read:

It has reached me that Ibn Suḥaym’s letter has arrived to you, and that it was accepted and believed by some of those with knowledge among you. And God knows that this man has lied about me, saying (I say) things that I have never said.⁵²⁴

So these are my words. I trace them back to God and His Prophet. This is what stands between you and us. So if anything else is mentioned about us, other than this, it is lies and falsehood.⁵²⁵

Sulaymān ibn Suḥaym was an early follower who later became an ardent critic.⁵²⁶ But Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb had good reason for concern: in an environment where the distribution and public recitation of epistles was a key means of communication and propaganda, false reports could be hugely damaging for the movement, as his tone suggests. The clear sense from this brief overview, then, is of a grassroots movement emerging in eighteenth-century Najd which rejected many of the established beliefs and practices of the age. This movement spread via the public recitation of epistles, aimed at lay audiences and contested rival forms of scholarly authority. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb would find political backing for this mission in the pact with Muḥammad ibn Su’ūd in in al-Dir‘iyya in 1744, but not before raising alarm and fierce refutations by critics who condemned his ideas in the strongest terms. Indeed it seems

⁵²² Michael Cook. ‘Written and oral aspects of an early Wahhābī epistle’, *Bulletin of SOAS* 78:1 (2015), 176. European travelers to Arabia like J.L Burckhardt (d.1817) support this. J. L .Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and the Wahabys Collected during his travels in the East* (London: 1831), 1/250. (“The Wahabys have established schools in every village, and oblige the fathers of families to superintend the instruction of their children.”)

⁵²³ Crawford, *Ibn Abd al-Wahhab*, 45. (“the letters project a more rounded personality... a sense of a powerful personality working to achieve lasting impact in a fractured society.”)

⁵²⁴ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/5.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5/33. See also 5/12, 36-7, 58.

⁵²⁶ For the life of Ibn Suḥaym see ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān, ‘*Ulamā’ Najd khilāl thamāniyat qurūn*, 6 vols. (Riyadh: 1997), 2:381-382. Ibn Ghannām preserves their correspondence in full, documenting the breakdown and hostility between the two. See *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/270 – 273.

that if Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and his movement remain controversial in contemporary Islam, as noted earlier, this is perhaps the most enduring feature of the movement.

‘Associating’ with God in eighteenth-century Arabia

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s writings paint a picture of deep religious ignorance in eighteenth century Arabia. He conceives and expresses this largely via the concept of *shirk* or ‘association’ with God. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb gives a broad reading of what it means to ‘associate’ with God and the clear sense from his works, also in Ibn Ghannām, is that most of the popular beliefs and practices of the age fell under the category of *shirk*. Briefly, his *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* condemns the custom of seeking blessings (*al-tabarruk*) from stones and trees, likening this to the worship of pre-Islamic idols.⁵²⁷ Ibn Ghannām condemns the worship of these inanimate objects (*al-jamādāt*) in Arabia.⁵²⁸ He speaks of a popular custom by which women would travel and make sacrificial offerings to a sacred tree in the hope of finding a spouse:

Women and men would come to the little town of al-Fidā...where they would do the most ugly things, such as seeking blessings from and believing in a small date palm. Women who had been waiting in vain to be wedded sought this palm. They would embrace the trunk of the tree and then cry out, ‘O male date palm! I desire a husband before I become barren!’⁵²⁹

Ibn Ghannām reports that one of the first acts of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb after announcing his mission was to fell a tree allegedly worshipped in the area.⁵³⁰ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb includes other customs, like the protective use of amulets and charms (*ruqyā wa tamā‘im*), under the banner of *shirk*.⁵³¹ This is also the defining feature of rival schools and sects, particularly Shī‘ī Islam and Sufism. There is no sense of his reading of Shī‘ī or Sufi texts. He prefers blanket condemnation over closely engaging each tradition. On the Shī‘ī’s, ‘Abdul Wahhāb condemns all as unbelievers who commit *shirk* through the worship of ‘Alī and the imams.⁵³² This sect, he writes, were the first to bring *shirk* to the community.⁵³³ Nor does Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb engage the diverse branches of Sufism.⁵³⁴ We see a slight nuance as he separates the Ḥanbalī Sufi ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166) from the purported *shirk* of his followers:

The mendicants of Satan (*fuqarā’ al-Shayṭān*) attribute themselves to Shaykh ‘Abdul Qādir, may God have mercy on him, but he is free of them... Whoever supplicates to ‘Abdul Qādir is an unbeliever and ‘Abdul Qādir is free of them...O people whom God has guided, do not think these people truly love the

⁵²⁷ Muḥammad ibn, Abdul Wahhāb. *Kitāb al-Tawhīd; alladī huwa ḥaqq Allāhī ‘ala ‘ibādihī* (Beirut: Dār al-Qur‘ān al-Karīm, 1398/1978), 24-6.

⁵²⁸ Ibn Ghannām, *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/11-13.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 15. This is also cited in Haj. ‘Reordering Islamic Orthodoxy’, 369, n.55.

⁵³⁰ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/30-1

⁵³¹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. *Kitāb al-Tawhīd*, 12-20.

⁵³² ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Risāla fi al-radd ‘ala al-Rāfiḍa’, in *Mu‘allafāt al-Shaykh*, 4/29.

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ For a detailed overview see Esther Peskes. ‘The Wahhābiyya and Sufism’ in de Jong and Radke, ed. *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 141-162.

saints; they are the enemies of the saints!...Whoever loves a people obeys them. So, whoever most loves the saints and obeys them believes (like them) only in God.⁵³⁵

This seems a blanket condemnation of the Qādirīyya, an established Sufi order. Elsewhere he condemns the *shirk* of Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn al-Farīd, both of whom seem to have enjoyed a following in the region.⁵³⁶

In perhaps his first epistle, which Bunzel dates to 1741, ‘Abdul Wahhāb condemns the *shirk* of *al-Burda* (The Cloak), a famous devotional litany in praise of the Prophet by the Egyptian Sufi al-Buṣīrī (d. 1294). ‘Abdul Wahhāb quotes the offending line in question:

Some of the early authors committed something of the branches of greater *shirk* (*al-shirk al-akbar*)...on account of ignorance. An example of this is the statement in *al-Burda*: “O most noble of creation (the Prophet), none have I to seek refuge in but you.” (*yā akrama al-khalq, mā lī alūdhu bihi siwāka*)...Whenever one of the *mushrikūn* contend with you, referring to the greatness of the author, his knowledge and righteousness...Say; ‘More knowledgeable than he, greater and more righteous, were the companions of Moses, whom God chose over all the worlds...yet they still said; ‘Moses, make for us a god as they have gods.’ (Q 7:138)...*Shirk* may be committed by the righteous and knowledgeable.⁵³⁷

We note that defenders of al-Buṣīrī are summarily described as *mushrikūn*. Yet Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb reserves perhaps his sharpest criticism for local saints and cult-like figures in Arabia. These were called Tāj, Shamsān and Idrīs.⁵³⁸ We learn little about these figures from his works but it seems, based on the references of his critics, that they were descendants of the Prophet to whom votive offerings were made by followers.⁵³⁹ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb condemns their veneration as worse than pre-Islamic idolatry:

Indeed I declare and call Shamsān and others like him to be false gods (*tawāghīt*). This is because they call people to worship them in place of God with a worship that is grosser than even the worship of *al-Lāt* and *al-‘Uzza*. My words are not reckless. They are but the truth (*laysa fī kalāmī majāzafa bal huwa al-ḥaqq*.)⁵⁴⁰

Crawford suggests this is found in one of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s earliest letters.⁵⁴¹ If so, it further explains the force of the opposition he faced, as the divisive potential of his thought upon established belief and custom became clear. More commonly, Ibn Abdul Wahhāb does not specify Tāj, Shamsān or Idrīs but condemns the cult of saints in general terms. This is a recurring theme in the *Rasā‘il*.⁵⁴²

I call people to be sincere in their worship to God alone, and I prohibited them from supplicating to living and dead saints (*al-ṣāliḥūn*), and others, and of committing *shirk* in the worship of God by way of making

⁵³⁵ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/52-4. See also 5/66, 69, 89, 148, 151.

⁵³⁶ For references to Ibn ‘Arabī, see ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/126. It is far from clear however as to the nature of this influence. The Wahhābī scholar Shaykh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf also speaks of “al-ittiḥādiyya” – probably a reference to Ibn ‘Arabī’s school - enjoying followers at the time of ‘Abdul Wahhāb: Al-Shaykh, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. *Miṣbah al-zalām* (Riyādh: Maktabat al-Mālik Fahad al-Waṭaniyya, 2003), 44.

⁵³⁷ Ibn Qāsim, ed. *Al-Durar Al-Saniyya*, 2/11. C.f. Bunzel, ‘Manifest Enmity’, 396.

⁵³⁸ For references to these figures see ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/52, 75, 148 and 182.

⁵³⁹ Cook. ‘Written and Oral Aspects’, 167, n.20.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/186.

⁵⁴¹ Crawford. ‘The Da’wa of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’, 151.

⁵⁴² ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/25. (“most people today believe these are the greatest acts of gaining nearness to God.”)

sacrificial offerings (*dhabh*), vowing (*nudhr*), reliance (*tawakkul*) and prostration (*sujūd*), and other acts which are the right of God alone... This is what all the prophets called to, the first and last of them.⁵⁴³

Ibn Ghannām adds that *shirk* came to dominate Arabia via the popular veneration of saints and shrines.⁵⁴⁴ Devotional acts of supplication (*du‘ā’*), vowing (*nudhūr*) and prostration (*sujūd*) are all acts of worship (‘*ibāda*’), Ibn Abdul Wahhāb insists, and belong to God alone.⁵⁴⁵ He also rejects seeking the intercession (*tawassul*) or assistance (*istighātha*) of any prophet, saint or intermediary.⁵⁴⁶ The terms for idols in the Qur’an (*aṣnām*, *awthān*) also reemerge to a large degree in his works. These are synonyms for graves:

We prohibit people from the idols (*awthān*) placed on the grave of (the Companions) of Zubair and Talḥa. And if you say that these are not idols, and that supplicating to the people of graves and seeking their assistance (*al-istighātha bihim*) in times of hardship is not *shirk*... this is unbelief. Between you and us are the works of all the scholars, the earlier and later generations, both Ḥanbalī’s and others.⁵⁴⁷

Ibn Ghannām reports that Ibn Abdul Wahhāb destroyed the grave of the companion Zaid ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, an object of local veneration, in 1743.⁵⁴⁸ This act, he writes, served to publicly announce the mission.⁵⁴⁹

The notion of *shirk* or ‘associating’ with God thus appears a vast category, extending to many of the established beliefs, customs and sects of the age. Several key conclusions emerge from this overview. First, it is worth noting that much of this is not new. The critique of Shī‘ī Islam or Ibn ‘Arabī echoes Ibn Taymiyya, for example, even if the nature of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s encounter with these groups, and his grasp of their thought, is unclear. Opposition to the cult of saints also follows Ibn Taymiyya.⁵⁵⁰ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is well aware of this and speaks of sending Ibn Taymiyya’s works to his contemporaries to defend and explain his position:

And I sent you the epistle of Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn (Ibn Taymiyya) where he mentions that whoever supplicates to a prophet, companion or saint... in an unbeliever by consensus, and you praised it, and you declared it was the truth.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 5/36.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/13-20.

⁵⁴⁵ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/25, 47, 52, 111, 126, 150, 152, 154, 232.

⁵⁴⁶ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 38-40.

⁵⁴⁷ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/137. Also 5/60, 74, 148. Also see the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd* where ‘Abdul Wahhāb entitles a chapter ‘what is reported of exaggeration (*ghulū*) the graves of the righteous (*al-ṣāliḥūn*) turning them into idols (*awthān*) for worship in place of God’. Abdul Wahhāb. *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*, 45-8.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/30-1.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 1/31.

⁵⁵⁰ For references to Ibn Taymiyya in ‘Abdul Wahhāb letters see ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/29, 67, 139, 186. For an overview of all citations of Ibn Taymiyya found throughout ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s works, see Abd al-Hakīm ibn Ibrahim al-Matroudi, *The Hanbali School of Law and Ibn Taymiyya: Conflict or Conciliation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 131-169.

⁵⁵¹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā‘il Shakhshiyya’, 5/229.

The importance of Ibn Taymiyya for Ibn Abdul Wahhāb's critique of the cult of saints is noted in scholarship since the works of Ignaz Goldziher and Henri Laoust.⁵⁵² His blanket condemnation of Sufi tradition, however, extending even to the Qādirīyya, is less discriminate than Ibn Taymiyya's complex attitude towards Sufism.⁵⁵³ Secondly, Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb does not appear to engage the distinction between lesser and greater *shirk*. The impression, occasional made explicit, is that the manifestations of *shirk* in his time, particularly on the cult of saints, fell under the category of greater *shirk*.⁵⁵⁴ Thirdly and most crucially, it would seem that Ibn Abdul Wahhāb focuses exclusively on the externals of faith. Nowhere in his works does he discuss the underlying roots or causes of *shirk*, or explore the internal dimensions of faith. His concern is solely the outward manifestations of *shirk*. We see this in the *Rasā'il*:

I say that Islam is not established in people until they know the meaning of 'no god but God' ... Yet I also say that only God knows our inner secret state ... This is all true and I openly say it.⁵⁵⁵

The question of *shirk*, then, is a question of what people do outwardly. The inner life, it seems, is left for the individual and God. Closely related to this, Ibn Abdul Wahhāb argues that anything seen to stand between the believer and God, regardless of its nature or identity, is an 'idol'. He anticipates and dismisses claims of a qualitative difference between the idols worshipped at the time of the Prophet and the idols, meaning the graves, of his age. For Ibn Abdul Wahhāb, the nature of *shirk* is the same;

If he says; '*Shirk* is the meaning of idols, and we do not worship idols.' Ask him; 'what is the meaning of the worship of idols? Do you think that they (the pre-Islamic Arabs) believed that rocks and stones create, give sustenance and control affairs?' ... If he says; 'No, but they would turn to the rocks and stones...supplicating and sacrificing to them, saying 'this brings us close to God' ... Say; 'True! Yet this is what you do in front of the edifices built on the graves! This proves that you worship idols.' ... Also, your statement, '*shirk* is idol worship'; do you mean that *shirk* only implies this act? And that relying upon saints and supplicating to them is not an example of this?...He must then admit that whoever worships a saint has committed the same *shirk* that is mentioned in the Qur'an.⁵⁵⁶

Graves are idols and the identity of what is 'associated' with God is irrelevant for Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb. The essence of *shirk* is the same. In this way Ibn Abdul Wahhāb blurs any distinction between supplicating to saints in eighteenth century Arabia and worship of idols at the time of the Prophet. Anything seen to stand between the believer and God, whether a tree, amulet, saint, shrine or grave, becomes an 'idol' for Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb, an outward manifestation of *shirk* that reflects his concern for the externals of faith.

⁵⁵² Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1981), 242-45. Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'institut francais d'archeologie orientale, 1939), 506-40; *Les Schismes dans l'Islam* (Paris: Payot, 1965), 321-2. William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962), 145.

⁵⁵³ George Makdisi, 'Ibn Taymiyya: A Sufi of the Qadiriyya Order', *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, vol. 1 (1974); 118-129. Thomas Michel, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Sharh on the Futuh al-Ghayb of 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani', *Hamdard Islamicus* 4:2 (1981); 3-12. For a recent analysis see Arjan Post, 'A Glimpse of Sufism from the Circle of Ibn Taymiyya', *Journal of Sufi Studies* 2015 (5:2), 147-56.

⁵⁵⁴ For the occasional references to greater *shirk* see 'Abdul Wahhāb, 'Rasā'il Shakhsiyya', 5/29.

⁵⁵⁵ 'Abdul Wahhāb, 'Rasā'il Shakhsiyya', 5/64.

⁵⁵⁶ 'Abdul Wahhāb, 'Kashf al-Shubuhāt', 1/182.

One final reflection on *shirk* merits consideration. This is Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s criticism of the science of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and draws on the Qur’anic verse that accuses those Christians who take rabbi’s and monks as “lords besides God”. The verse in the Qur’an reads as follows:

They have taken their rabbi’s and monks as lords besides God and the Messiah, son of Mary. And they were not commanded except to worship one God, there is no god but Him. Exalted is He over what they associate with Him. (Q 9:31)

Ibn Taymiyya invokes this verse in his *Kitāb al-Īmān* to condemn the custom of deferring to established legal rulings, known as *taqlīd*, instead of drawing directly from the Qur’an and *sunna*.⁵⁵⁷ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb notes this in the *Rasā’il*. This is one of Ibn Taymiyya’s proofs (*min adillatihi*), he writes, of the error of following the words of scholars over the text of the Qur’an.⁵⁵⁸ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb then cites 9:31 but his use of this verse goes much further than just a criticism of *taqlīd*. It appears to reject the entire tradition of jurisprudence or *fiqh* outright as a manifestation of *shirk*:

The messenger of God and the imams after him interpreted this verse (9:31) to be referring to what you call jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which is what God has called *shirk* and the taking of scholars as lords.⁵⁵⁹

The *fiqh* tradition is condemned as *shirk* in the sense that it ‘associates’ the views of scholars with revelation. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, jurisprudence turns jurists into ‘lords.’ Yet the irony is that he draws on the works of Ibn Taymiyya, a scholar, to argue this, and is clearly indebted to much of Ibn Taymiyya’s writings for his own conception of *shirk*. When debating opponents in the *Rasā’il*, moreover, he often invokes his Ḥanbalī credentials.⁵⁶⁰ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is more ambivalent towards legal tradition and the custom of deferring to scholars than this passage suggests, but in other passages he does insist upon rejecting all authority outside the Qur’an and *sunna*:

I do not – praise to be God – follow the way of any Sufī order or jurist (*faqīh*), nor the course of any speculative theologian (*mutakalim*), or any other Imam such as those that I venerate, such as Ibn Qayyim, al-Dhahabī of Ibn Kathīr. I summon only God, only Him, and observe the path laid down by His prophet, God’s messenger.⁵⁶¹

A common refrain is to dismiss the idea that only a scholar (*‘ālim*) or *mujtahid* can consult the Qur’an. This, he writes, is a specious argument (*shubha*) akin to the Christians in 9:31.⁵⁶² Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb insists that all Muslims, not just scholars, seek knowledge from the Qur’an.⁵⁶³ He accuses a critic;

⁵⁵⁷ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm, Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā* (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Muḥammad ‘Alī Baydūn : Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 2000/1426), 20/216.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibn Ghannām, *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/444 and 1/446

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1/444.

⁵⁶⁰ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhsiyya’, 5/36, 105, 111, 144, 188-9, 258

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5/252. Cited in Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 30.

⁵⁶² Ibn Ghannām, *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/254-5.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1/250.

You have decided that only the *mujtahid* can benefit from the words of God and His messenger. You are saying, 'It is prohibited for someone else to seek guidance from the words of God, His messenger and companions... This *shubha* of yours that has been cast in your hearts...is that you are not able to understand the words of God, the Prophet and the *salaf*..⁵⁶⁴

This is of course rooted in the presumption that the Qur'an is easy to understand, that it has a clear, self-evident meaning, readily accessible to all Muslims, and which accords to Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's thought.⁵⁶⁵ This is problematic. Critics would of course contest his reading and this sits awkwardly, perhaps, alongside his other key claim that most professed Muslims of his and earlier ages had failed to understand the religion and were, as a result, unbelievers and *mushrikūn*. Claims of mass religious ignorance, on the one hand, and the self-evident truth of the Qur'an on the other, would seem to raise a tension in Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb that he neither appears to acknowledge or discuss.

What makes a Muslim? Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb on the nature of faith

Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb conceives of many kinds of *shirk*, leaving an impression of *shirk* as the defining feature of eighteenth-century Arabia. But this is not perhaps his main contribution. As has been seen, much of this is derivative, particularly vis-à-vis the works of Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's main contribution and contention lies in the creedal question of the nature of faith (*īmān*); what makes one a Muslim, and why. We may even put this in negative terms; what is it that expels one from the fold of Islam; at what point is someone claiming to be Muslim no longer considered as such? This is the crux of the issue. Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb here challenges his contemporaries and revives some of the earliest debates in Islamic theology on the nature of faith, the relation between faith and acts (*a'māl*) and what it means to be Muslim.

The question of the relation of acts (*a'māl*) and faith (*īmān*) was a key issue in early Islamic theology.⁵⁶⁶ This hinged on the status of the person who professed Islam but whose acts, either committing sins or omitting obligatory acts, contradicted that profession. Different positions arose among early theological schools. Briefly, the Khārijites viewed acts as a constituent part of faith and held that performance of sins, such as theft, fornication or drinking alcohol, was sufficient grounds for excommunication (*takfīr*). The Khārijites became notorious for the implications of this position including the murder, on grounds of apostasy, of early Muslims including the Prophet's cousin, 'Alī.⁵⁶⁷ The opposite view was the Murji'a

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 1/256-7.

⁵⁶⁵ For a discussion of this idea see 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* 2015 (26:2); 117-144.

⁵⁶⁶ For an overview of the *īmān/amal* debate see W. M. Watt, 'Conditions and Membership of the Islamic Community', *Studia Islamica* 21 (1964); 5-12. Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 4-145. Josef Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 85-100.

⁵⁶⁷ The Khārijites have been called the "arch-takfiri's" of Islamic history. See Adang, Ansari, Fierro and Schmidtke, ed. 'Introduction' in *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfīr* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2015), 5. The

sect. Initially a political response to the Khārijites, the Murji'a argued that faith consisted of confession and belief alone; acts were not integral to faith and all who profess and believe in Islam were believers destined for heaven, regardless of acts.⁵⁶⁸ The rationalist Mu'tazilī school sought a middle-position; a sinful Muslim was neither a believer or unbeliever, but in a position between them (*al-manzila bayna al-manzilatayn*); he is a *fāsiq*, though not excommunicated and his ultimate status is with God.⁵⁶⁹ What became the mainstream Sunni position is captured by the following passage attributed to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (d. 936):

We do not excommunicate anyone from the people of the *Qibla* by the sins they commit, like fornication or theft of drinking wine, as the Khārijites do...But we do say that whoever commits a major sin, such as fornication or theft or what is similar to that, and deems this to be permissible and not believing it prohibited, this person is an unbeliever.⁵⁷⁰

A Muslim who commits sins is not to be excommunicated, then, as long as he professes belief in Islam and does not deny the reality of the sin and prohibition. That this is the dominant view of Sunni theology is seen in the works of Imam al-Ṭahāwī (d. 933), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and others.⁵⁷¹

It is within this context that Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb writes. His contribution lies in reviving these early debates, challenging what appears to have been the dominant position of his age and placing a particular stress on outward actions (*a'māl*) as the decisive measure of faith. As will be shown, the clear sense in Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb is that the verbal declaration of the *shahāda* ultimately counts for little if this is combined with any outward act of what he considers *shirk*. Put differently, it does not suffice for Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb to believe in God and profess the *shahāda*. The *shahāda* alone does not guarantee entry into the Muslim community. One must demonstrate this by outwardly acting in line with the faith. He writes:

There is no disagreement that *tawhīd* has to be in heart, on the tongue, and by deed. If there is any deficiency in (any) of this, a man is no Muslim. If he knows *tawhīd* but does not act on it, he is an unbeliever (*kāfir*) and disobedient (to God), like the Pharaoh, Iblīs and such like.⁵⁷²

Khārijites were not monolithic and there arose several different sub-sects within the movement. Toshiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology; A Semantic Analysis of Īmān and Islām* (Tokyo; Yurindo Publishing Ltd, 1965), 1-35.

⁵⁶⁸ Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma; a Source-Critical study* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1981). In Arabic, see Muhammad Sa'īd Ramadān, al-Būṭī. *Al-Madhhāhib al-Tawhīdiyya wa al-Falsafāt al-Mu'āsira* (Dimaqsh: Dār al-Fikr, 2008), 95-104. Muḥammad, Ibrāhīm Fayyūmī. *Al-Khawārij wa al-Murji'a* (Madinat Naṣr, al-Qāahirah: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 2010). Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief*, 83-92.

⁵⁶⁹ Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 59-102. Also see al-Būṭī. *Al-Madhhāhib al-Tawhīdiyya*, 80-94.

⁵⁷⁰ Abū al-Ḥasan, al-Ash'arī. *Al-Ibāna 'an uṣūl al-Diyāna*, ed. Mahmūd Ḥusayn Fawqiyya (Cairo: Dār al-'Ulūm, 1977), 10. Cited in al-Būṭī. *Al-Madhhāhib al-Tawhīdiyya*, 111.

⁵⁷¹ Hamza Yusuf, trans. *The Creed of Imam al-Tahāwi: al-'Aqīda al-Tahāwiyya* (Zaytuna Institute, 2007), 64. ("We refer to the people who face our qibla as Muslim believers, as long as they acknowledge, confirm and do not deny all that the Prophet brought, stated and imparted.") Aladdin M. Yaḳūb. *Al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief: Al-Iqtisād fī al-I'tiqād* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 241-251. Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Bayna Faysāl al-Tafrīqa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵⁷² 'Abdul Wahhāb. 'Kashf al-Shubuhāt', 1/198. Also Crawford, *Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb*, 57.

We may call this a ‘theology of action.’⁵⁷³ It underpins Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s conception of faith and is the central pivot of this study. It may at first glance seem inconsequential to stress the importance of belief by heart, tongue and acts. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb presents this as a normative position. But on closer reading it is clear this has a much sharper meaning. He gives primacy to the role of acts in faith as a means of distinguishing true from false Muslims. This is clear when he derides as a great slander (*buhṭān ‘azīm*) the idea that professing the *shahāda* alone enters one into Islam.⁵⁷⁴ Many passages from his works reveal this was precisely the argument of his opponents:

And many of those who claim to have knowledge say; ‘whoever says ‘no god but God’ is not be declared an unbeliever, even if he rejects the resurrection or all of the *sharī‘a*.⁵⁷⁵

The point of these ignorant people (*al-juhalā’*) is to say that whoever says it (the *shahāda*) cannot be made an unbeliever, nor can he be fought, regardless of what he does.⁵⁷⁶

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb mines the sources of the Qur’an and *sunna* to support a theology of action. He asks if the Prophet was sent just for people to state that there is ‘no god but God’, not to act upon it.⁵⁷⁷ Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb points to the case of companion and Caliph Abū Bakr (d. 634), who fought tribes in the “wars of apostasy” (*hurūb al-ridḍa*) that declared the *shahāda* but refused to pay alms tax (*zakāt*).⁵⁷⁸ To claim faith is by the *shahāda* alone, he adds, equates Abū Bakr with the false-prophet Musaylima.⁵⁷⁹ Against the claim that the Prophet did not fight the hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*) in Medina because they professed the *shahāda*, despite knowing they were, at heart, unbelievers, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb counters that this group were only protected because their outward actions were in line with the faith:

As for your reasoning that the Prophet, peace be on him, and those after him, did not *takfīr* the hypocrites or kill them; both the scholars and ordinary people know that had they manifested just one word or one action of idol worship, or insulted (the message of) *tawḥīd* that the Prophet came with, then the Prophet would surely have killed them.⁵⁸⁰

In this way Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb reads a theology of action into the life of the Prophet and companions. The point is to prove that membership of the Muslim community is defined by external acts. One cannot simply profess to be Muslim - there must be a practical, outward dimension to faith.

Yet it is clear that critics took a different view. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb presents this as the view of the Prophet and companions, but his works also reveal this was a minority position in his time. To this, he

⁵⁷³ Crawford prefers the phrase ‘tawḥīd of action’; *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*, 57. Followers of ‘Abdul Wahhāb use the term *tawḥīd ‘amalī* to capture this stress on actions. See Qadhi, *Four Principles of Shirk*, 43.

⁵⁷⁴ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā’il Shakhṣiyya’, 5/150.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5/41.

⁵⁷⁶ ‘Abduh Wahhāb, ‘Kashf al-Shubuhāt’, 1/183-4.

⁵⁷⁷ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā’il Shakhṣiyya’, 5/137.

⁵⁷⁸ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Kashf al-Shubuhāt’, 1/184. Also ‘Rasā’il Shakhṣiyya’, 5/138.

⁵⁷⁹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā’il Shakhṣiyya’, 5/137-8.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5/218. Also see 5/222. Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/305.

responds with an ethic of elitism and righteousness. Invoking the notion of the strangeness (*ghurbā'*) of the religion, often seen in the works of Ibn Qayyim, Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb cites a range of eschatological hadiths to present himself as a lone defender of the faith:

The Prophet warned us that 'Islam will return strange (as it began strange)', so how do you order us to follow the majority of people? And there are many similar hadiths, such as; 'There will be a time when nothing remains of Islam but its name, nothing of the Qur'an but its script', and many other hadiths where the Prophet makes clear that falsehood will one day overpower truth...So woe to you, then, that you expect us to follow the majority! ⁵⁸¹

In a famous hadith the Prophet spoke of seventy-three sects, 'Abdul Wahhāb notes, only one of which escapes the Fire.⁵⁸² The true Muslim community or *jamā'a* refers to those defending the truth, he adds, not those with the most numbers; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855) alone was the *jamā'a* when defending the creed during the Mu'tazilī inquisition (*miḥna*).⁵⁸³ It seems that Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb understands his thought and movement on similar terms. Taking a marginal position on the nature of faith and what it means to be Muslim did not reveal his error. Rather, this only strengthens his conviction.

Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb on excommunication (*takfīr*)

This takes us to the place and function of *takfīr* or excommunication in Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb. The issue of *takfīr* is shrouded in controversy in the Islamic tradition. Both the hadith collections and jurists warn against declaring *takfīr* over a professed Muslim. In a typical passage, al-Qurṭubī (d. 1259) warns: "the issue of *takfīr* is a dangerous one. Many people have undertaken it and have fallen, whereas the outstanding scholars have refrained from it and remained blameless."⁵⁸⁴ This reflects the fear of the consequences of the charge. Declared an apostate, an individual can be killed, have their property confiscated, marriage annulled and be denied a Muslim burial under the classical jurisprudence relating to apostasy. Yet, cases of *takfīr* are also ubiquitous across Islamic intellectual history, without these requisite penalties. *Takfīr* has long functioned as a tool for scholars and sects to demarcate the limits of orthodox belief and practice. Toshiko Izutsu describes the early centuries of Muslim theology;

Any article of creed, any dogmatic point asserted by a sect was likely to arouse the exercise of *takfīr* on the part of the opposing sects. And not infrequently, the exercise of *takfīr* was reciprocal...as theology developed gradually, *takfīr* came to be exercised freely and, apparently, without any compunction, in regard to the minute details of dogmatics."⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸¹ 'Abdul Wahhāb. 'Rasā'il Shakhsiyya', 254. Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/307.

⁵⁸² Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/308.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1/309.

⁵⁸⁴ Abū Abāss Aḥmad b. 'Umār, al-Qurṭubī. *Al-Mufhim li-mā Ashkalā min talkhīṣ kitāb al-Muslim*, ed. Muḥyī al-Dīn Bīb Matū (Beirut/Damascus: 1417/1996), 3/111. Cited in Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidke, ed. 'Introduction', in *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective of Takfīr* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1.

⁵⁸⁵ Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief*, 18-19.

Early Māturīdī theologians were known for the blanket *takfīr* of the Mu‘tazilī sect due to the view that humans, not God, create their actions.⁵⁸⁶ Mu‘tazilī thinkers, in turn, made *takfīr* of all sects affirming the beatific vision, on the grounds this entails an anthropomorphic conception of God.⁵⁸⁷ Mālikī jurists of the Mamlūk era were notorious for the tendency to execute on suspected charges of heresy.⁵⁸⁸ As Sherman Jackson notes, the ecumenical spirit of al-Ghazālī’s (d.1111) *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* was designed precisely to counter the perceived overuse of *takfīr* in his day.⁵⁸⁹ Yet al-Ghazālī’s theological tolerance, we might add, did not extend to the Ismā‘īliyya or the thought of Ibn Sīnā.⁵⁹⁰

Takfīr is central to the thought of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and the life of the early Wahhābī movement. The sheer scope of *takfīr* in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is of note. If the two key strands of his thought are a vast reading of *shirk*, on the one hand, and an emphasis on outward acts as the measure of faith, on the other, these meet and crystallize on the issue of *takfīr*. With acts integral to faith, it becomes clear for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb that any outward act of what he considers *shirk* expels one from the faith: one cannot perform acts of *shirk* and remain a Muslim. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, his contemporaries may claim to be Muslim, to believe in God and the Prophet, but in their actions they proved themselves *mushrikūn*:

Know that the proofs regarding *takfīr* of the righteous Muslim (*al-muslim al-ṣāliḥ*), if he commits *shirk* with God (*ashrakā bi-llāh*)... are clearly found in the words of God, the words of the Prophet and all the words of the scholars.⁵⁹¹

The scholars, from all the four schools mention in the chapter concerning the rules pertaining to the apostate (*fi bāb ḥukm al-murtad*) that if a Muslim believes that God has taken a son, he is an apostate. Likewise, if he commits *shirk* then he is an apostate.⁵⁹²

Whoever worships God night and day, but then calls to a prophet or saint by their grave, has taken them as another god. They do not witness there is no god but God because God alone is He who is to be called upon. This is what the *mushrikūn* of our time do by the graves of Zubayr or ‘Abdul Qādir or others!⁵⁹³

His vast reading of contemporary *shirk*, then, becomes an equally broad ethic of *takfīr* against the wider community. In the homogenous milieu of eighteenth-century Arabia, it would seem that outward actions were the only means for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb to distinguish true from false Muslims. This also explains his use of language and terminology, which, as noted earlier, refers in general terms of the unbelievers and *mushrikūn* of his time. But we also find quite direct and targeted accusations of unbelief in the *Rasā’il*. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s address to his opponent Ibn Suḥaym is instructive:

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

⁵⁸⁸ Amalia Levanoni. ‘Takfīr in Egypt and Syria during the Mamlūk Period’, *Accusations of Unbelief*, 154-188.

⁵⁸⁹ Jackson, *On the Boundaries*, 5-12.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 44-59. Yaqub. *Al-Ghazālī’s Moderation*, 241-251.

⁵⁹¹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhsiyya’, 5/29.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 5/152.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 5/166, see also 52, 66, 69, 89, 148, 151.

Before answering, we must say that you and your father are steeped in *kufr*, *shirk* and hypocrisy (*nifāq*)... neither you nor your father, until now, understand the declaration of ‘no god but God’. And I myself will testify to this on the Day of Judgment ... So we will clearly reveal this to you now, in the hope that you repent unto God, and return to the religion of Islam, if God so wishes to guide you. ⁵⁹⁴

It is clear, reading the epistle, that the reason for this was Ibn Suḥaym’s defense of the cult of saints.⁵⁹⁵ Yet, this ethic of *takfīr* was not restricted to intellectual debate or abstract scholarly discourse. Rather, it underpinned the political and military spread of the movement. While there is no sign of any doctrinal development or change in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s works, both Crawford and Bunzel observe a shift in language and emphasis from 1744 onwards, after the pact with Ibn Su’ūd.⁵⁹⁶ From this period Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb starts to link *takfīr* with “fighting” (*al-takfīr wa al-qitāl*).⁵⁹⁷ An initial emphasis on *takfīr* now lays the basis for armed conflict. In *Kashf al-Shubuhāt*, dated to 1750, he insists on the obligation to fight the *mushrikūn* in the manner of the Prophet:

You must understand that the Prophet...fought them on account of their *shirk*, called them to sincerity in the worship of God alone...the Prophet fought them so that all *du‘a* is to God alone, all sacrifice is only in His name...indeed all types of worship are only to and for Him. It was this fact that made their blood and property permissible to the Prophet, only then have you understood the *tawhīd* that the Prophets called to. ⁵⁹⁸

He defends this stress on *qitāl* in the *Rasā’il*, arguing: “we only fight (*nuqātil*) the worshippers of idols, just like the Prophet did.”⁵⁹⁹ We therefore find a clear thread in Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb connecting *shirk*, *takfīr* and *qitāl*. Rooted in a theology of action, outward acts of *shirk* lead inevitably to *takfīr*. This, in turn, makes one a target for *qitāl*. Conflict between Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and professed Muslims outside his fold seems not only justifiable, then, but inevitable. Yet it is also worth noting that he calls for conflict only after 1744, after his movement gained the political backing of Ibn Su’ūd. This suggests a political pragmatism on his part, one perhaps in contrast with a theological exclusivism and a clear emphasis on *shirk* and *takfīr* that is found in his earliest works.⁶⁰⁰

Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) and Divinity (*ulūhiyya*)

This suggests there is no real distinction between the categories of *shirk* and *kufr*. If any act of *shirk* takes one outside the fold of Islam, *shirk* becomes synonymous with *kufr*. In the *Rasā’il* Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb uses the terms interchangeably, condemning votive offerings (*nudhūr*) and supplications

⁵⁹⁴ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’ 5/126. Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/299. We should note the apologetic defense offered by Zarabozo, *The Life, Teachings and Influence*, 119. (“perhaps it was his overabundant love for the truth in the face of absolute refusal to listen that lead him to (these) harsh words.”)

⁵⁹⁵ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/299-304.

⁵⁹⁶ Crawford. ‘The Da’wa of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb’, 153. Bunzel, ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 36-7.

⁵⁹⁷ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/272.

⁵⁹⁸ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Kashf al-Shubuhāt’, 1/190-1.

⁵⁹⁹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/98 and 114.

⁶⁰⁰ Recall, for example, that his first works condemn the perceived *shirk* of the *Burda* and condemn saints like *Shamsān* and others as idols worse than those of the time of the Prophet.

(*du 'ā'*) to saints as both *kufṛ* and *shirk*.⁶⁰¹ He writes the “religion of unbelievers is the belief in saints” (*dīn al-kuffār huwa al- 'itiqād fī al-ṣāliḥīn*).⁶⁰² But Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is aware that opponents, those subject to *takfīr* and *qitāl*, were professed Muslims who claimed to believe in God and the Prophet. To lay out a deeper, conceptual basis for *takfīr* he draws on a distinction in the tradition between two forms of *tawḥīd*. This is the distinction between oneness of God’s lordship (*tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*) and divinity (*tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*). This likely originates with Ibn Taymiyya though there are traces of this distinction in the works of the Ḥanbalī Ibn Baṭṭa al-Ukbarī (d. 997).⁶⁰³ This is a major feature of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s theology and represents perhaps the deepest influence of Ibn Taymiyya upon his thought.

Following Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb explains that *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* denotes a basic form of monotheism. This is the recognition of a single God who is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. *Tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*, by contrast, denotes the exclusive worship of God. This is to direct all acts of worship to God alone. Crucially, only *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* enters one into Islam:

Know that *tawḥīd* is of two types: *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*, this is that God is recognized as Creator and Controller (*al-mudabbir*) of all affairs... This is true but it still does not enter the person into Islam since most created beings recognize this truth... What guarantees entry into Islam is *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*, and this is when nothing is worshipped except God.⁶⁰⁴

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb repeatedly invokes this distinction in the *Rasā'il*.⁶⁰⁵ It is *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya* alone, he insists, that is the “difference between unbelief (*kufṛ*) and Islam.”⁶⁰⁶ The clear implication is that his contemporaries, those engaged in the cult of saints and other forms of *shirk*, had fallen short of *ulūhiyya* by failing to direct all worship to God alone. This is clear from the *Rasā'il* as Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is seen defending his stress on *takfīr* by insisting and even struggling to convince others of this distinction. In one letter, he attempts to convince a contemporary named Ḥasan who writes that the division between two kinds of *tawḥīd* is “hard to accept” (*yushkilu 'alayya*).⁶⁰⁷ Elsewhere, he praises an unidentified scholar in Tharmadā’ who appears to have been convinced, as Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb has it, that “one does not enter Islam by *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* alone unless it is joined with *tawḥīd al-ulūhiyya*.”⁶⁰⁸ In these passages it appears the entire Arabian Peninsula, for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, is conceived in terms of this distinction between *rubūbiyya/ulūhiyya*.

⁶⁰¹ On votive offerings, see ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā'il Shakhshiyya’, 5/12 (*kufṛ*) and 232 (*shirk*). On supplications, see 5/33, 101, 10-4 (*shirk*) and 154 (*kufṛ*).

⁶⁰² Ibid. 5/54.

⁶⁰³ For an overview of this division in Ibn Taymiyya see Laoust, *Essai*, 472-3 and 531-2. Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 27-39. For a distinction between God’s *rabbāniyya* and *wahdāniyya* in al-Ukbarī see ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Badr, *al-Qawl al-Sadīd fī radd man Ankara taqṣīm al-tawḥīd* (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Qayyim, 1423/2003), 32.

⁶⁰⁴ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā'il Shakhshiyya’, 5/25.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 5/11, 19, 21, 64, 121, 145-8, 151.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., 5/21.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārikh Najd*, 1/488.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 1/335.

A common argument found in the works of Ibn Taymiyya is that the group known as the *mushrikūn* in the Qur'an affirmed *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya*.⁶⁰⁹ Again, Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb follows this and cites the Qur'anic verses that point to the common ground between the *mushrikūn* and the Prophet, including the shared belief in the same God, *Allāh*, who is Creator and Sustainer.

Know that God sent the Prophet to a people who worshipped, performed the pilgrimage, gave alms, and remembered God. Yet they would also make created objects (*makhlūqāt*) intermediaries between them and God and say; 'We only desire to come closer to God through them, and we wish that they interceded for us with Him.' (Q 11:18, 39:3)...Otherwise, the *mushrikūn* testified that Allāh is the sole creator...that no one grants life or death except Him, and that no one controls the affairs of creation except Him.⁶¹⁰

The rationale for invoking the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* is clear. This group is a foil for Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's contemporaries. The point is to stress that the Prophet was sent to a community who believed in God and performed many acts of worship, yet were still condemned for their *shirk*. The parallel with the professed Muslims of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's time, then, is clear. Yet Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb then makes a claim that does not appear in the works of Ibn Taymiyya, or perhaps any other scholar. The *mushrikūn* of his own time, he argues, were qualitatively worse than those at the time of the Prophet:

The *mushrikūn* of our time are in more extreme *shirk* than those of the past (*mushrikī zamānina aghlaṭ shirkan min al-awallīn*). Those from the past would commit *shirk* in times of ease (*al-rakhā'*), and were sincere to God (*yukhlīṣūn*) in times of hardship. But the *shirk* of the *mushrikūn* of our time is constant, in times of both hardship and ease. And the proof of this is (the verse): 'And when they board a ship they call to God sincerely, yet when He delivers them to land they associate with Him' (Q 29:65)⁶¹¹

The *mushrikūn* of our time have exceeded the unbelievers from the time of the Prophet (*mushrikī zamāninā qad zādū 'alā kuffār al-nabī*) for they would call to saints and righteous people in times of both ease and hardship...⁶¹²

We find this in one of his first works, 'The Four Principles of *Shirk*' (*Fī 'Arbā'a Qawā'id al-Shirk*) dated to 1743, a version of which was distributed orally among early Wahhābī settlements and memorized by all followers, scholars and laity.⁶¹³ Non-Wahhābī Muslims of eighteenth century Arabia, then, those devoted to the cult of saints and other forms of *shirk*, are conceived and condemned as worse than the Qur'anic *mushrikūn*, a group that denied the Prophet and that are said to have worshipped idols. The logic for this is that the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* were less consistently devoted to their *shirk*. The sense of exclusion towards rival Muslims outside the Wahhābī fold is absolute. Yet we can comprehend this only through a theology of action - only on the basis of outward acts, by emphasizing acts as the decisive measure of faith, the determinant of a Muslim or *mushrik*, can a category like the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* be qualitatively superior to the purported *mushrikūn* of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's time. While an original

⁶⁰⁹ See for example Ibn Taymiyya. *Majmū' al-Fatāwa*, 1/91, 155, 311.

⁶¹⁰ 'Abdul Wahhāb'. 'Rasā'il Shakhshiyya', 5/124-125.

⁶¹¹ 'Abdul Wahhāb'. 'Arbā'a Qawā'id al-Shirk', in *Mu'fallāt al-Shaykh*, 1/21-22.

⁶¹² 'Abdul Wahhāb'. 'Rasā'il Shakhshiyya', 5/69. See also 5/65, 125.

⁶¹³ Cook. 'Written and oral aspects', 168, 170, 172.

claim, not found in the works of any other scholar, it could also be argued that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is here entirely consistent and faithful to his doctrinal reading of the measure of faith.

A final aspect of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s approach to *takfīr* is of note. This is what Crawford calls “secondary *takfīr*.”⁶¹⁴ This is the obligation to excommunicate not only those guilty of *shirk* but, equally, all who hesitate or fail to declare *takfīr* of such. Failure to excommunicate *shirk* is in itself grounds for *takfīr*. We see this across his writings as Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb writes:

Whoever does not pronounce *takfīr* over the *mushrikūn*, or is doubtful as to their unbelief (*aw shakka fī kufrihim*), or affirms the legitimacy of their school (*aw ṣaḥḥaha madhhabahum*), he is an unbeliever by consensus (*fā huwa kāfir ifmā’an*).⁶¹⁵

Whoever does not excommunicate them (the *mushrikūn*), he is by that an unbeliever. (*wa man lam yukaffiruhum fā huwa kāfir*).⁶¹⁶

This suggests a subtle difference between *kāfir* and *mushrik* in his thought. A *mushrik* commits acts of *shirk*, perhaps, while a *kāfir* refers to those who hesitate or fail to *takfīr*. Yet the principle of secondary *takfīr* is not innovative. Again, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb takes this from Ibn Taymiyya.⁶¹⁷ The relevant passage in Ibn Taymiyya is part of a polemic against the purported heresies of Shī‘ī sects. Of those who believe that ‘Alī is a god or prophet, Ibn Taymiyya writes: “There is not a doubt about his unbelief. Rather, there is no doubt about the unbelief of those who refrain from declaring their unbelief (*man tawaqquf fī takfīrihi*).”⁶¹⁸ The idea of secondary *takfīr* is however firmly rooted in Islamic intellectual history. Mu‘tazilī thinkers of the classical period, to give one example, declared the unbelief of anyone who doubted the unbelief of the Ash‘arī doctrine of the beatific vision.⁶¹⁹ The principle is not an innovation and has a deeper history than perhaps Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb realizes. Yet of note is how he draws on a principle of secondary *takfīr* found in Ibn Taymiyya, recasting this to apply it to the *shirk* and the *mushrikūn* of his time. The aim is to draw a sharp binary in the Arabia Peninsula on the issue of *shirk* in which there is no room for neutrality or middle ground. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, there seems no option outside the binary of declaring *takfīr* of the cult of saints, in effect joining the movement, on the one hand, or being subject to *takfīr*, on the other. We see a thread tying *shirk* to *takfīr* to secondary *takfīr* in his thought, one in which any sense of tolerance of the cult of saints or other forms of *shirk* makes one an unbeliever and target of confrontation.

Was Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb a Khārijite?

⁶¹⁴ Crawford, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab*, 66.

⁶¹⁵ Ibn Qāsim, ed. *Al-Durrar al-Saniyya*, 10/91. C.f. Bunzel, ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 193.

⁶¹⁶ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘*Rasā’il Shakhsiyya*’, 5/137 and 213.

⁶¹⁷ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/393 and 1/417.

⁶¹⁸ Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Ṣārim al-Maslūl ‘alā shātīm al-Rasūl*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdullāh al-Ḥalwānī and Muḥammad Kabīr Shawdrī, 3 volumes (al-Dammām: Ramādī lil-Nashr, 1417/1997), 3/1108.

⁶¹⁹ Izutsu, *Concept of Belief*, 19.

It would seem from the foregoing that there are clear parallels between Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and the Khārijites, the early sect of the seventh century. With an emphasis on actions as the measure of faith, a broad *takfīr* of all professed Muslims outside his fold and calls for conflict after 1744, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb comes to resemble Khārijite thought and practice in important ways. It is not surprising that critics made this link. In response to the claim by Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb that he “hated” the doctrine of *tawhīd*, for example, the critic ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Īsā al-Muwais retorts:

We only hate what you, at your whim, have called *tawhīd*, which entails excommunicating Muslims (*takfīr al-muslimīn*) and deeming their blood and property licit, with not support from God and His Messenger, except in the way of the Khārijites.⁶²⁰

The Ḥanbalī critic Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Saffarīnī likens Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb not to the Khārijites generally, but to Nāfi’ ibn al-Azraq (d. 685) in particular, the notorious leader of the most violent subsect of the Khārijites, the *Azraqiyya*.⁶²¹ The Yemeni reformer Muḥammad al-Shawkānī (d. 1839), a critic of the cult of saints and initially supportive of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, later retracted his support after learning of his *takfīr* of professed Muslims. Al-Shawkānī wrote several poems criticizing Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb in this regard and comparing him to the Khārijites.⁶²² This is a common trope in the refutations of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb in later centuries. It is seen in the work of later Ottoman critics, like Aḥmad Zaynī Daḥlān (d. 1886) and Ibn ‘Ābidīn (d. 1836), and continues to appear to modern sources.⁶²³

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb addresses this claim in his writings. His response is significant for he rejects the association with the Khārijites but maintains an emphasis upon both outward actions and *takfīr*. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb carefully distinguishes his theology, presented as Sunni tradition or ‘the people of Sunna and the community’ (*ahl al-sunna wa al-jam‘a*), from the Khārijites in a letter to Ibn Suḥaym:

You say that the scholars (*ahl al-‘ilm*) say; ‘It is not permitted to pronounce *takfīr* of the Muslim on account of his sins’. And this is right but nonetheless this is not what we do. The Khārijites declare *takfīr* over he who commits illicit intercourse (*zīna*) or steals or sheds blood - every sin, if the Muslim commits it, is an unbeliever (according to them). As for the people of the *sunna* and their *madhhab*: (we say) the Muslim cannot be declared an unbeliever except by *shirk* (*illā bi-shirk*) and we never excommunicated idols (*tawāghīṭ*) and their followers except on account of their *shirk*.⁶²⁴

⁶²⁰ Buntzel. ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 69.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 65. On al-Saffarīnī see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 163, n.125.

⁶²² Muhammad, al-Shawkānī. *Diwān al-Shawkānī aslāk al-jawhar wa ‘l-hayāt al-fikriyya al-salafiyya fī ihyā’ sunnat khayr al-bariyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d), 161-4. Cited in Bernard Heykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129. See also 129-138.

⁶²³ Aḥmad, Zaynī Daḥlān. *Al-Durar al-Sunniyya fī al-radd ‘ala al-Wahhābiyya* (Istanbul: Maktabat al-Ahbāb, 2003/H.1424), 54. Muḥammad Amīn, ibn ‘Ābidīn. *Radd al-mukhtār ‘ala durr al-mukhtār sharh tanwīr al-absār* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2003/1463), 4/413-4. For modern Arabic sources see Muḥammad Abū Zahrā’. *Tārīkh al-Madhhab al-Islāmiyya* (Al-Qāhira; Dār al-Fikr al-‘Arabī, n.d), 1/235-8. Jamāl Effendī al-Iraqī al-Sidqī, al-Zahāwī. *al-Fajr al-Sādiq fī al-radd ‘ala munkiri al-tawassul wa a-khawāriq* (al-Qāhira, 1905), 20. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham al-Kabbani, *The Doctrine of Ahl al-Sunna versus the “salafi” movement* (Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications, 1996). Algar, *Wahhabism*, 21-22; El Fadl, *Reasoning with God*, 252-4.

⁶²⁴ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘*Rasā‘il Shakhsiyya*’, 5/233. Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/305.

It is uniquely the sin of *shirk*, then, of associating with God in worship, that leads to *takfīr*. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb states to not excommunicate on the basis of other sins like drinking, adultery or fornication, and in this sense is distinct from the Khārijites. But the distinction offered to Ibn Suḥaym is perhaps deceptive. Critics could of course point to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s broad reading of *shirk*, to the fact he speaks of the “*mushrikūn* of our time” and describes his scholarly opponents as “*ulamā’ al-mushrikīn*”, to question its value. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb offers a conceptual distinction with the Khārijites, then, but one may question its practical worth.

This also reveals Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s attitude to matters of sin and morality. It would seem there is room in the Muslim community for Muslims who steal or drink alcohol. It is uniquely the sin of ‘associating’ with God that leads to *takfīr*. But this leads to something of a tension. It seems preferable not to pray at all, than to pray by a grave or shrine.⁶²⁵ The first is a sin, the second is *shirk*. It seems better to fornicate than to supplicate (*du‘ā’*) to a saint. And critics were quick to note this. In 1743 al-Ṭandatāwī accuses Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb of a perverse sense of ethics and priorities;

One of the most amazing things about him... (is that) he leaves alone the unbeliever, he leaves alone those groups whose corruption is agreed upon, such as the adulterer and the drinker of alcohol, and he excommunicates only those whom perform acts of remembrance (*dhikr*) or believe in a saint.⁶²⁶

In response, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb reverses the critique. Alcohol and adultery are sins, he explains, but they are not major doctrinal infractions that challenge the very core of the faith. In Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s terms, they relate to the branches (*fur‘ū*) of the religion, not its roots (*uṣūl*):

But this (*shirk*) is not a sin in the branches (*fur‘ū*) of the religion...like adultery or theft. By God, by God and by God again, it is a much greater issue than this!⁶²⁷

Both sides accuse the other of misplaced priorities. To critics, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb appears indifferent to issues of morality and ethics, with little interest in cultivating virtues for believers or the community. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, in turn, accuses his opponents of failing to understand that *shirk*, not drinking or adultery, is the major sin in the Qur’an, with its elimination the purpose for God sending prophets.⁶²⁸

Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and his critics

The third and final part of this chapter examines the nature of scholarly opposition to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. The names of critics run throughout the *Rasā’il* and provide a backdrop to his life and thought.

⁶²⁵ On juristic debates over the status of the individual who neglects prayer see Robert Gleave, ‘Abandoning Prayer and the Declaration of Unbelief in Imāmī Jurisprudence’ in *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam*, 414-434.

⁶²⁶ Traboulsi, ‘An Early Refutation’, 402.

⁶²⁷ Ibn Ghannām, *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/286.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*

Attention has been drawn to critics like Ibn Suḥaym and al-Ṭandatāwī. Yet it is worth noting, briefly, the attempts of later followers to defend Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb from his critics. A contemporary Saudi theologian writes:

The most prominent reason for the slanders of opponents in their works...(is that) many of these opponents and those who claim to follow Islam (*al-muntasibīn ilā al-islām*) were in error and far from the straight path. Errors and corrupt beliefs reached a great many Muslims before the Shaykh started his mission...Most Muslims worshipped their Lord in ignorance...innovation (*bid‘a*) and things relating to *shirk* (*shirkiyyāt*) thus naturally appeared in various forms.⁶²⁹

Natana De Long Bas argues that opposition to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb was rooted in power struggles with rival scholars, not religious teachings.⁶³⁰ This is hardly convincing. It ignores the deeper doctrinal nature of the challenge that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb posed, his rejection of most of the beliefs and practices of his age and his mass *takfīr* of other Muslims. In lieu of the sharp binary drawn between the followers of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and those outside the movement, in which there seems no middle group between membership of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s movement or being liable to *takfīr*, it is hardly surprising that he raised alarm and fierce opposition among scholars.

In what follows this chapter examines two refutations of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb.⁶³¹ One is written by his brother, Sulaymān, the other by the largely unknown figure, ‘Abdullah ibn Sayyīd ‘Alāwī al-Ḥuḍārī. Both were contemporaries of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and condemn his *takfīr* of professed Muslims. Each refutation, however, is rooted in a rival conception of *shirk*. Al-Ḥuḍārī offers a different conception of greater *shirk* (*shirk al-akbar*), defends the cult of saints and is rooted in Sufī tradition, citing Sufī figures such as Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh al-Iskandārī (d. 1309). Sulaymān, by contrast, is a product of the same Ḥanbalī milieu as his brother. He criticizes the cult of saints and is equally indebted to the works of Ibn Taymiyya, whom he accuses his brother of misreading. Sulaymān’s treatise hinges on the distinction between greater and lesser *shirk*, and an insistence upon the strict legal requirements for any charge of *takfīr*. Taken together, Sulaymān and al-Ḥuḍārī give an insight into the breadth of opposition to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. They also reveal how rival conceptions of *shirk*, of what it means to ‘associate’ with God and the consequence of the charge, underpin much of this critical reception.

The Sufī response: ‘Abdullāh ibn Sayyīd ‘Alāwī al-Ḥuḍārī

⁶²⁹ Al-‘Abd al-Latīf, *Da‘wā al-Munāwī‘īn*, 89.

⁶³⁰ De Long Bas, *Wahhabi Islam*, 19. (“the fact that his teachings were accepted until the local authorities began to feel their bases of power threatened makes it clear that the issues were really about power struggles and not so much about heretical religious teachings.”)

⁶³¹ For works engaging the full breadth of refutational sources, see Esther Peskes, *Muhammad b. ‘Abdalwahhab (1703-92) im Widerstreit: Untersuchungen zur Rekonstruktion der Frühgeschichte der Wahābiya* (Beirut-Stuttgart, 1993), 49-121. Buntzel, ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 33-96. For treatments of specific refutations, see Paul Heck. ‘An Early Moroccan Response to Wahhabism: The Politics of Intercession’, *Studia Islamica*, 107:2 (2012); 235-54. Hamadi Redissi. ‘The Refutation of Wahhabism in Arabic Sources, 1745-1932’ in Madawi al-Rasheed, ed. *Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Arabia’s Political, Religious and Media Frontiers* (London: Hurst & Company, 2008); 157-183.

We have little information on al-Ḥudārī. His name suggests a link to another critic, the Yemeni Sufi ‘Alawī ibn Aḥmad al-Ḥaddād (d. 1817).⁶³² His refutation has been published and translated albeit without analysis of its contents.⁶³³ It is a short but dense treatise. Al-Ḥudārī centers on four points and reveals a clear familiarity with Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb’s ideas. It also seems to have been influential in its time. The entire treatise is copied verbatim, without attribution, in al-Ḥaddād’s lengthier refutation, *Miṣbāh al-Anām*.⁶³⁴ A number of passages are found, again without attribution, in the *Ḍurrār al-Saniyyā fī al-Radd ‘ala al-Wahnābiyyā* by the Ottoman critic Aḥmad Zayn al-Daḥlān (d. 1886).⁶³⁵ This suggests al-Ḥudārī was an important resource for later generations of critics.⁶³⁶ It is clear from the text that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb was alive at the time of writing, allowing us to date it to before his death in 1792.⁶³⁷

Al-Ḥudārī first rejects the division between *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* and *ulūhiyya*. It will be recalled that this provides the conceptual basis for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb’s approach to *takfīr*: contemporaries affirmed *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* but fell short of *ulūhiyya* and were thus outside the fold of Islam. Against this, al-Ḥudārī argues this division of *tawḥīd* has no basis in the Qur’an or tradition:

One of the astonishing things in the works of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb is that the people of the *qibla*, who declare ‘no god but God and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God’, do not know *tawḥīd*. (He says) *tawḥīd* is of two kinds; *rubūbiyya*, which the unbelievers and *mushrikūn* affirm, and *ulūhiyya*....which enters one into Islam. I wish I could know how the unbelievers could have a concept of *tawḥīd*!... Have you ever heard, Muslims, anything in the traditions or the biography to the effect that the Prophet, when the Bedouin came to him to accept Islam, distinguished between these two and told them that only *ulūhiyya* enters them into Islam?! Did he not just accept the profession of the *shahāda* and rule this an acceptance of Islam? What slander and falsehood upon God and the Prophet!⁶³⁸

This distinction served to conflate the *mushrikūn* of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb’s time with those from the time of the Prophet. Both sets of *mushrikūn*, for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb, affirmed *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyya* and he uses the Prophet’s encounter with the *mushrikūn* as a foil for his community. Al-Ḥudārī challenges this. The Muslims of eighteenth-century Arabia are distinct from the *mushrikūn* in the Qur’an, he insists, as the latter were a group that denied the Qur’an and prophecy. For al-Ḥudārī, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahnāb conflates two entirely distinct categories of people;

Regarding the noble verses he uses to declare *takfīr* over Muslims ... These verses refer to the unbelievers of Mecca, not Muslims ... If you ponder these verses which he has made a proof (*hujja*) to declare *takfīr*

⁶³² Not to be confused with his famous grandfather, the Sufi master ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Alī al-Ḥaddād (d.1720). Al-Ḥudārī’s refutation is not mentioned in the overviews provided by Buntzel, ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 33-94. Or Peskes, *Muhammad b. ‘Abdalwahhab*, 49-121.

⁶³³ R. Y. Ebied and M.J.K Young. ‘An Unpublished Refutation of the Doctrines of the Wahhabi’s’, *Revista degli studi orientali* 1 (1976); 377-97.

⁶³⁴ The full title is *Miṣbāh al-Anām wa jalā al-ḥalām fī radd shubah al-bid‘ī al-Najdī allati aḍalla bihā al-‘awāmm* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Amīra al-Sharafiyya, 1325/1907).

⁶³⁵ Noted in Hamadi Redissi. ‘The Refutation of Wahhabism’, 161.

⁶³⁶ Crawford’s comments seem pertinent here. *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab*, 15. (“The polemics of his (‘Abdul Wahnāb’s) enemies have fared less well. Many of them, influential at the time, have sunk from sight over the centuries.”)

⁶³⁷ Ebied and Young suggest the last quarter of the eighteenth century. “An Unpublished Refutation”, 378.

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, 383 (English), 393-4 (Arabic). For a list of scholars whom echo this critique of the *rubūbiyya/ulūhiyya* distinction, see al-‘Abd al-Latīf, *Da‘wā al-Munāwī‘īn*, 425-449.

over Muslims, you will find he has acted blindly; they do not contain any proof at all; they apply to the person who asserts that God has daughters, sons and associates (*shurakā*), these people deny the Qur'an and reject the Prophet and deny the Resurrection. What connection is there between a Muslim and an unbeliever?! How weak his intellect! How small his powers of judgment! ⁶³⁹

For al-Ḥudārī, that contemporary Muslims affirm the Prophet and the authority of the Qur'an renders any comparison to the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* erroneous. But it is clear that Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb measures faith by different standards. A theology of action means professing the *shahāda* is not decisive. Rather, outward actions are the measure of faith and, in this way, the comparison with the Qur'anic *mushrikūn* is seen to be valid. In this light, al-Ḥudārī and Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb argue past each other.

Al-Ḥudārī then examines the meaning of *shirk*. He writes there are two kinds of *shirk*, lesser and greater *shirk*, with lesser *shirk* consisting of religious ostentation (*riyā*).⁶⁴⁰ He then conceives of greater *shirk* or *shirk al-akbar* in very different terms to Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb. Al-Ḥudārī defines greater *shirk* as *shirk* in "essence and attributes" (*shirk bi-dhāt wa ṣifāt*).⁶⁴¹ This is the view that either God's essence or His attributes, like creating, sustaining life, or giving death, are found in other than God.⁶⁴² He writes:

The meaning of oneness (*waḥdaniyya*) is that there is none beside Him. As long as you have in your mind the view that there is something independent alongside God, whether in His essence or resembling His attributes or even in participating in His actions, you are a *mushrik* with your Lord...For God has said of Himself; 'there is nothing like Him' (Q 42:11).⁶⁴³

This implies that greater *shirk* is essentially outright polytheism; the notion that there is another deity alongside God. It suffices to insist upon God's uniqueness, then, that 'there is nothing like Him', to avoid falling into this form of *shirk*. Al-Ḥudārī writes:

We do not assert the divinity of any of these things which he claims to be gods and which, he says, we worship in spite of God, for 'There is nothing like Him' (Q 42:11). God is One in essence and attributes and actions...If then it is established from the Qur'an that God is One, there is nothing like Him, and that He has no partner in His Kingdom, where then are these *mushrikūn*...? And Shamsān and Idriss and Tāj and others say that God is Exalted above what the wrongdoers say.⁶⁴⁴

Al-Ḥudārī conceives of *shirk* not in terms of outward acts, but as the view that any aspect of divinity resides in other than God. On this basis he defends the veneration of Tāj and Shamsān. Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb, to recall, condemns venerating these saints as worse than the worship of pre-Islamic idols.⁶⁴⁵ Rival conceptions of *shirk al-akbar* between Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb and al-Ḥudārī thus lead to very different attitudes towards the cultural and religious environment of eighteenth-century Arabia. Al-

⁶³⁹ Ebied and Young. "An Unpublished Refutation", 386-38 (English), 395-96 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁰ Ebied and Young. "An Unpublished Refutation", 380 (English), 392 (Arabic).

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 380-1 (English), 392 (Arabic).

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 384 (English), 394 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 384-6 (English), 394-5 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁵ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/186.

Ḥuḍārī finally challenges Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb on the cult of saints. He denies that veneration of saints is *shirk*, defending this as a legitimate aspect of Muslim piety, amply attested in the Qur’an and Muslim tradition:

Among his ravings are that belief in righteous figures (*al-ṣāliḥūn*) constitutes *shirk al-akbar* ... As for the intercession (*shafā’a*) of saints and their special status with God: even if one could only adduce the words of Muḥammad), peace be on him; ‘Indeed, through a righteous Muslim God repels evil from a hundred of his neighboring people’, and his words, ‘the earth shall always have upon it forty men the like of Friend of the Merciful (*khalīl al-Raḥmān*, Abraham), through them you will be given water, through them you will be helped, not one will die without God replacing him with another’, it would be sufficient. What intercession could be greater, than that God should repel evil through them, and cause rain to descend?...If you consider these traditions and others you see how statements denying intercession and the saints special status with God have no other cause than stubbornness and fanaticism.⁶⁴⁶

Al-Ḥuḍārī defends the custom of seeking blessings (*al-tabarruk*) from saints and sacred relics. Citing the *Shifā* of Qāḍī Iyād (d. 1149), he writes that companions like Mu‘awiyah and Khālīd ibn al-Walīd sought blessings from relics like the Prophet’s cloak and hairs.⁶⁴⁷ The saints have special qualities and secret knowledge gifted to them by God, he adds, including knowledge of “inspiration” (*‘ilm al-ilhām*) and “disclosure” (*‘ilm al-kashf*).⁶⁴⁸ Many of these arguments are not new. Much of al-Ḥuḍārī’s treatise echoes the defense of the cult of saints by Taqī al-Dīn al-Ṣubkī (d. 1355), for example, in his refutation of Ibn Taymiyya.⁶⁴⁹ Nor is this treatise designed to convince Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. Much of Al-Ḥuḍārī’s language and argument reflects the kind of devotion to saints that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb condemns as *shirk*. Al-Ḥuḍārī’s aim, then, is to defend the beliefs and customs that were under attack since Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, not to convince his adversary. This explains his use of key figures from Sufī tradition, like Ibn ‘Aṭā Allāh al-Iskandārī (d. 1309) and al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1286), rather than those figures, like Ibn Taymiyya, to whom Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb might defer.⁶⁵⁰ This is precisely the tactic of our next treatise.

The Ḥanbalī response: Sulaymān ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb

We have little information on Sulaymān.⁶⁵¹ There is little to indicate his early life and education and it is not clear if he was older or younger than his brother. A fellow scholar, it is known that after the death of their father in 1741 Sulaymān assumed his position as judge (*qāḍī*) of the town of Ḥuraymilā’.⁶⁵² His treatise, dated to 1753, is titled *al-Ṣawā’iq al-Ulūhiyya fī al-Radd ‘alā al-Wahhābiyya* (The Divine

⁶⁴⁶ Ebied and Young, “An Unpublished Refutation”, 388-91 (English), 396-7 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 389 (English), 396 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 390 (English), 396 (Arabic).

⁶⁴⁹ Taqī al-Dīn, al-Ṣubkī. *Shifā’ al-siqām fī ziyārat khayr al-anām*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: 1978). This is analyzed in Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999), 195-219. Al-Ṣubkī’s critique of Ibn Taymiyya was in turn rebutted by the student and follower of Ibn Taymiyya, who continued Ibn Taymiyya’s polemic against saint worship and shrines. Muḥammad bin ‘Abd, al-Hādī. *Al-Ṣarīm al-Munkī fī al-radd ‘alā al-Subkī* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān li-Tibā’ah wa al-nashr wa al-tawzī, 1992).

⁶⁵⁰ Ebied and Young, “An Unpublished Refutation”, 390 (English), 396-7 (Arabic).

⁶⁵¹ For overviews of Sulaymān, see Commins, *Wahhabi Mission*, 22-4. Bunzel, ‘Manifest Enmity’, 75-80.

⁶⁵² For an overview of all relevant biographical information on Sulaymān; ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ‘Āl Bassām. *‘Ulamā’ Najd khilāl thamāniyat qurūn* (Riyādh: Dār al-‘Āṣima, 1419/1998), 2:350-57.

Lightning in Refutation of the Wahhābī's), though this is likely a later title.⁶⁵³ Sulaymān's is thus a later refutation, coming a decade after al-Ṭandatāwī's in 1743 and nine years after the pact with Ibn Su'ūd in 1744. The reason for this, again, is unclear. The refutation comprises forty-five chapters and is one of the most detailed refutations of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb. Later sources recognise Sulaymān as a major opponent and there seems a sense of embarrassment that Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb's brother was an ardent critic. Ibn Ghannām speaks of a deathbed repentance by Sulaymān, a view echoed in later tradition.⁶⁵⁴ This is perhaps apocryphal, with modern supporters of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb insisting how even prophets like Adam, Noah and Muhammad had relatives reject their message.⁶⁵⁵

Two features of Sulaymān's treatise stand out. The first is the deference to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim.⁶⁵⁶ He cites these on almost every page, naming them the "two shaykhs" (*al-shaykhayn*) and describing Ibn Taymiyya by the honorific *shaykh al-Islām*.⁶⁵⁷ This is not just a "clever rhetorical stroke", as David Commins assumes, a tactic of using his brother's sources against him.⁶⁵⁸ Rather, it is clear that Sulaymān is deeply indebted to the works of Ibn Taymiyya and his treatise reads as much a defense of the latter as a refutation of his brother. The second feature, linked to the first, is Sulaymān's criticism of the cult of saints. Sulaymān echoes his brother and speaks of the "ignorant people (*ahl al-jahl*) among us", lamenting how many visit shrines over the *ka'ba* itself.⁶⁵⁹ This may explain the silence in Sulaymān on his brother's destruction of the tomb of Zaid ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, perhaps a tacit sign of approval. It is clear, then, that Sulaymān offers a very different refutation to al-Ḥuḍārī. His refutation does not preclude some key common ground with his brother.

The crux of Sulaymān's treatise, that which underpins and animates the refutation, is a rejection of his brother's *takfīr* of professed Muslims. Sulaymān reflects many of the fears of the wider Islamic tradition around the practice of *takfīr*. In one of the opening passages, Sulaymān asks of his brother:

You declare *takfīr* over he who witnesses that there is no god but God, that Muhammad is his slave and messenger, and over he who performs the prayer, gives alms tax, fasts during Ramadan, all the while believing in God, His angels, books and messengers...And so we must ask you...from where have you got this?!⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵³ Sulaymān, ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb. *Al-Ṣawā'iq al-Ulūhiyya fī al-Radd 'alā al-Wahhābiyya*, ed. Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Buṭāwā, 5th edition (Cairo: Dār al-Insān, 1492/2008).

⁶⁵⁴ Ibn Ghannām. *Tārīkh Najd*, 2/812-3.

⁶⁵⁵ Al-'Abd al-Latīf, *Da'wā al-Munāwī 'īn*, 84.

⁶⁵⁶ On the popularity of Ibn Taymiyya in this period, see Basheer Nafi, 'A Teacher of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb': Muhammad Hayat al-Sindi and the Revival of *Ashab al-Hadith* Methodology', *Islamic Society and Law* 13:2 (2006), 214, 226-30, 234-5, 239-40.

⁶⁵⁷ Sulaymān. *Al-Ṣawā'iq* 34, 36, 39, 40-1, 44-5, 66, 69, 70, 79, 82, 94, 110, 114-7, 119, 136. .

⁶⁵⁸ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission*, 23.

⁶⁵⁹ Sulaymān. *Al-Ṣawā'iq*, 119. For other passages condemning the widespread ignorance in his community see 121, 123, 127, 132, 134, 137-8, 143, 151-3.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-1. For other passages where he firmly rejects the application of *takfīr*, see 35-6, 58, 66, 68, 70, 74-5, 76, 79, 82-84, 85, 97-99, 119, 151-171.

Sulaymān repeatedly insists that membership of the Muslim community rests upon the verbal profession of the *shahāda*. A central refrain is that whoever affirms ‘no god but God’ and Muhammad’s prophecy enjoys the legal status and protection of a Muslim. Sulaymān cites fifty hadith narrations that prohibit *takfīr* of anyone professing the *shahāda*.⁶⁶¹ Invoking the *Kitāb al-Īmān*, he cites Ibn Taymiyya to argue that this is the reason the Prophet did not fight the hypocrites in Medina.⁶⁶² Ibn Qayyim, he adds, writes the *shahāda* alone enters one into Islam and ensures the repentance of the apostate.⁶⁶³ Sulaymān accuses his brother of going against the consensus (*ijmā’*) of the scholarly tradition in declaring *takfīr* and calling for conflict against professed Muslims: “this is consensus (*ijmā’*) from the *umma*. The scholars (*ahl al-‘ilm*) have agreed that whoever utters the *shahādatayn*, he becomes in accordance with the laws of Islam.”⁶⁶⁴ Like al-Ḥudārī, on this basis Sulaymān rejects any link between the Qur’anic *mushrikūn* and the Muslim community of eighteenth-century Arabia.⁶⁶⁵ As with other critics, he likens his brother to the Khārijites as the only precedent in Muslim history.⁶⁶⁶ It is thus clear, early in the treatise, that Sulaymān targets above all his brother’s emphasis on *takfīr*, rejecting the idea that the majority of the professed Muslims were *mushrikūn* and unbelievers. This underpins the two key pivots of his argument.

Sulaymān is critical of the cult of saints, but also his brother’s use of *takfīr*. The legal category of lesser *shirk* (*shirk al-asghar*) affords him this balance. Sulaymān argues that many of the beliefs and practices associated with the cult of saints fall under this category and, as such, do not merit *takfīr*. This is not his own view, he insists, but that of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim:

Where did you get that a Muslim...if he supplicates to a living or dead (saint), makes vows or sacrifices to him or touches his tomb, taking from the earth around it, that all this is *shirk al-akbar*...If you say you have taken this from the writings of scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah or Ibn Qayyim, as they called all this *shirk*, we say; this is right and we agree with you in following these two...Yet they did not say what you say, that this is greater *shirk* that excludes one from Islam...You take from their works what works for you and ignore what doesn’t. Their works prove that these actions are lesser *shirk* (*shirk al-asghar*).⁶⁶⁷

Ibn Taymiyya condemns supplicating and sacrificing to saints, also touching and circumambulating graves, in terms of sin, error (*dallāl*) and innovation (*bid‘a*), Sulaymān argues, not as acts that exclude one from Islam.⁶⁶⁸ Moreover, scholars disagree on the legitimacy of the cult of saints, he adds, but none has ever made this grounds for *takfīr*.⁶⁶⁹ It is also wrong to claim that graves are idols, he insists, as the Prophet affirmed in the hadiths that idols will not return to Arabia after Islam.⁶⁷⁰ Throughout the treatise

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 171-193.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 97-99, 119.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁶⁴ Sulaymān. *Al-Sawā’iq*, 29.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 28, 46-7, 114, 120.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 58, 66, 68, 70, 74-5.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 39, 44, 119. On making votive offers as lesser *shirk*, see 35, 38, 39, 105, 110. On sacrificial offerings to saints as lesser *shirk*, see 35, 40, 105. On supplicating to saints as lesser *shirk*, see 105, 112, 114.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 47, 120, 162-3, 170.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 123, 138, 140, 143.

lies a deeper question of reasonableness for Sulaymān. Noting the cult of saints has been established in Muslim lands for centuries, he adds dryly that, if his brother is indeed correct, there will have been no real Muslim for the last eight hundred years except Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and his movement.⁶⁷¹

Sulaymān is not the first critic to invoke the category of lesser *shirk*. An early Ḥanbalī critic, Ibn ‘Afāliq, offers the same argument.⁶⁷² But we may question this reading of Ibn Taymiyya. As seen in the previous chapter, Ibn Taymiyya is highly critical of the cult of saints and it could be argued that Sulaymān underplays the depth of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique.⁶⁷³ Perhaps sensing this, he turns to a second argument. Even in cases of greater *shirk*, Sulaymān writes, one should not rush to *takfīr*. He writes that *takfīr* is ultimately a legal ruling (*ḥukm shar‘ī*), and that legal tradition urges caution in this situation. Sulaymān here invokes the legal principle of *hujja* or ‘manifest proof’. This is the principle that the person guilty of greater *shirk* should not be subject to *takfīr* until the ‘proof’ of their error is presented to them, a legal stratagem designed to mitigate against *takfīr* in cases of ignorance, coercion or insanity. Once again, Sulaymān roots this in the works of Ibn Taymiyya;

You say: The Shaykh Taqī al-Dīn (Ibn Taymiyyah), may God have mercy on him, said that if a petitioner requests things from an object, such as forgiveness of sins, entry in heaven, deliverance from fire, the sending down of rain...or anything like that – anything from the characteristics of God’s *rubūbiyya* – then this is *shirk* and error and the person must seek repentance or else he is to be killed (as an apostate). We say: Yes, but (Ibn Taymiyyah said) also that the person who does this is not be declared an unbeliever until the proof (*hujja*) is revealed to him...by clear speech (*bayān kalām*), if God wills.⁶⁷⁴

Sulaymān never directly cites Ibn Taymiyya on this point. Yet we find evidence for this throughout Ibn Taymiyya’s works. In *Al-Istighātha*, for example, Ibn Taymiyya writes:

Declaring a person an unbeliever (*al-takfīr*) is only for God; no one is to be regarded an unbeliever except the one whom God and His Messenger have ruled is such. This verdict...and the permissibility of sentencing him to death is conditional upon the prophetic proof (*al-hujja al-nabawiyya*) having reached him...otherwise, not everyone unaware of some matter of Islam is an unbeliever.⁶⁷⁵

Sulaymān repeats the principle of *hujja* across the treatise.⁶⁷⁶ In this way he argues that acts of greater *shirk* do not, in themselves, lead to *takfīr*. The individual guilty of greater *shirk* retains the legal status of a Muslim - on the basis of his or her *shahāda* - and must be educated as to the nature of their error; what Sulaymān terms *fahim al-hujja*. Sulaymān insists on this point because he accuses his brother of performing a generalised, mass *takfīr* of Muslims (*takfīr bi ‘umūm*), without engaging the stringent legal

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 41. See also 119, 121, 123, 127, 132-4, 137-8, 140, 143, 151-3.

⁶⁷² Bunzel, ‘Manifest Enmity’, 73.

⁶⁷³ For this, see Sulṭān Al-‘Umairī, *Ishkālīyyat al-‘idhār bi-al-jahal fī al-baḥṭh al-‘aqdī; al-itijāhāt, al-buniyya al-istidlāliyya, al-uṣūl al-manhajīyya* (Beirut; Lebanon, Namaa Centre for Research and Studies, 2016), 80-1.

⁶⁷⁴ Sulaymān. *Al-Ṣawā‘iq*, 41.

⁶⁷⁵ Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad, Ibn Taymiyya. *Al-Istighātha fī al-Radd ‘ala al-Bakrī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Waṭān, 1997), 1/381-2. Al-‘Umairī compiles all such passages found in Ibn Taymiyya’s works. Al-‘Umairī. *Ishkālīyyat al-‘idhār*, 39, 41, 43-4, 80, 85, 158.

⁶⁷⁶ See Sulaymān. *Al-Ṣawā‘iq*, 35, 45, 79, 85, 88, 91, 103, 109, 122, 160.

requirements. This practice, he notes, has its origins in the Khārijites.⁶⁷⁷ But Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb also invokes the principle of *hujja* in his works.⁶⁷⁸ He equally insists in the *Rasā’il* that he does not pronounce *takfīr* until the *hujja* has been presented. Yet upon closer inspection, it is clear that the idea of *hujja* means something very different for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. He writes:

The clear proof of God is the Qur’an and whomever the Qur’an reaches then the *hujja* has reached him...Most of the unbelievers and the hypocrites did not understand the *hujja* of God after it was presented to them, as God said: ‘Do you think they hear and reason?’ (Q 25:44)⁶⁷⁹

For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, the *hujja* is the Qur’an itself and whoever the Qur’an reaches becomes legally accountable to avoid *shirk*. Understanding is no prerequisite. But it is difficult to imagine that anyone in eighteenth century Arabia had not encountered the Qur’an in some form, meaning Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb likely views his entire Arabian milieu as liable for *takfīr*.⁶⁸⁰ Both brothers engage the principle of *hujja*, then, but do so for opposite ends. Sulaymān invokes the *hujja* to excuse the *shirk* of his community and to protect from *takfīr*. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb uses the *hujja*, by contrast, to condemn any Muslim engaged in *shirk*. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s use of the *hujja* seems an effective *takfīr bi ‘umūm* in which there is no room for ignorance, with all presumed to be accountable to avoid *shirk*.⁶⁸¹

In a basic sense, this reads as a legal debate between two brothers over the specific legal requirements for *takfīr*. Sulaymān accuses his brother of too readily excommunicating Muslims. But there is a deeper way of reading this debate. It would seem this legal debate is itself rooted in deeper doctrinal differences over what it means to be Muslim. Sulaymān insists upon the legal restrictions of *takfīr* precisely because he assigns more weight and value to the verbal profession of the faith. For Sulaymān, it is possible to remain a Muslim while committing outward acts of *shirk* - the *shahāda* ensures this legal status and protection. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s broad *takfīr*, by contrast, reflects his conviction that outward acts are key criterion of faith, that a Muslim cannot, by definition, perform any act of *shirk*. This fixation on what people do outwardly underpins his readiness to apply *takfīr* to those claiming to be Muslim.

Sulaymān’s criticism of *takfīr* and allusions to the Khārijites are common to critics. The idea that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb had misread the works of Ibn Taymiyya is also a recurring theme.⁶⁸² Yet Sulaymān’s treatise is important for many reasons, including its impact. Ibn Ghannām writes that Sulaymān turned the town of Ḥuraymila against his brother. He describes the town as having apostatized (*irtaddū*) and

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 103, 109, 122, 160.

⁶⁷⁸ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/25, 60, 183, 220.

⁶⁷⁹ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya’, 5/244..

⁶⁸⁰ Al-‘Umairī writes that ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s particular reading of *hujja* “closes the door” on any possibility of excuse in cases of ignorance. Al-‘Umairī. *Ishkāliyyat al-‘idhār*, 142.

⁶⁸¹ Later Wahhabi tradition eventually made understanding a requirement; Crawford, *Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb*, 64.

⁶⁸² See Al-Shawkānī. *Diwān al-Shawkānī*, 161-4. Da‘ūd ibn Sulaymān al-Naqshbandī al-Khālidi. *Al-Mihna al-Wahhābiyya* (Istanbul, 1974), 14. Cook, ‘On the Origins’, 200-201.

notes that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb ordered the killing of anyone caught with the epistle.⁶⁸³ Perhaps due to its influence, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb wrote a refutation of his brother.⁶⁸⁴ Alluding to Sulaymān as an “atheist” (*mulhid*), he affirms his stress on *takfīr* in cases of *shirk* and also his reading of Ibn Taymiyya:

Some atheists attribute to the Shaykh (Ibn Taymiyya) that these are lesser *shirk*...And yet you – may God have mercy on you – will find in his words, from the first to the last, in the first and second chapters, clearly stated, without need of allegorical interpretation (*ta‘wīl*)... that *du‘a*’ to the dead, and vowing in their name that they may intercede with God, is all greater *shirk* that God sent the Prophet to prevent. And he declared as an unbeliever who did not repent from it and he fought them.⁶⁸⁵

The allusion to Sulaymān is clear. But Sulaymān’s treatise is also significant for its difference with al-Ḥudārī and what this reveals of the diversity of opposition to Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, all of which is seen to center on rival notions of *shirk*. Al-Ḥudārī offers a rival conception of the nature of greater *shirk* and defends the cult of saints. In contrast, Sulaymān shares much of his brother’s critique but challenges the idea that acts of *shirk* must lead to *takfīr*. Though different critics, the principle of ‘secondary *takfīr*’ means Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb would see little difference between them. Both al-Ḥudārī and Sulaymān would become unbelievers by either legitimating *shirk* or in challenging his emphasis on *takfīr*.

Conclusion

The conflict between Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and his critics was eventually settled by the force of arms. The Wahhābī movement, with the forces of Muḥammad ibn Su‘ūd, conquered most of the Arabian Peninsula and extended into the Hijāz and southern Iraq shortly after Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb’s death in 1792.⁶⁸⁶ It is worth noting, however, that Sulaymān seems to have written one of the last refutations that Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb faced. Bunzel surveys the breadth and chronology of the refutational sources and notes a sharp decline after Sulaymān in 1753.⁶⁸⁷ The reason, he suggests, is that critics came to conclude that refuting Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb was futile.⁶⁸⁸ As early as the late 1740’s we see a Ḥanbalī critic, Ibn ‘Afāliq, imply this in a letter to a supporter of Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb: “You react to every piece of writing that comes your way by rejecting it and cursing it and ridiculing its author, even before it is opened and looked at.”⁶⁸⁹ A later critic, ‘Abdullāh ibn Dawūd al-Zubayrī writes how most opponents realized the futility of attempts to dissuade Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and thus waited for force of arms to kill off the movement:

⁶⁸³ Ibn Ghannām, *Tārīkh Najd*, 1/103. George Snavelly Rentz, ‘*Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (1703/4-1792) and the beginnings of a Unitarian Empire in Arabia*’ (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1948), 80. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission*, 22. Redissi, ‘The Refutations of Wahhabism’, 162.

⁶⁸⁴ This is titled *Mufīd al-Mustafīd fī kufr tārik al-tawhīd* (The Benefit of those Seeking Benefit on the unbelief of those who leave *tawhīd*). See ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Mufīd al-Mustafīd’, in *Mu‘allafāt al-Shaykh*, 1/279-329.

⁶⁸⁵ ‘Abdul Wahhāb. ‘Mufīd al-Mustafīd’, 1/297.

⁶⁸⁶ For a detailed overview of this period see Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission*, 71-104.

⁶⁸⁷ Bunzel, ‘*Manifest Enmity*’, 87-94.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

Most of the scholars of the lands wrote refutations of him...then, when the scholars saw that he was not responding to the truth...that advising him was unsuccessful, but rather his terrible acts were only multiplying, they stopped refuting him, and they said; 'this man is misled, and will only recant when he is overcome by force; nothing will deter him but the sword of the Sultan.'⁶⁹⁰

This is indeed what happened as the first Wahhābī state was crushed by Egyptian forces, upon Ottoman request, in the early nineteenth century.⁶⁹¹ But critics were perhaps more effective than they realized. A close reading of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb reveals a clear sensitivity to their claims. He responds to the charge that he represents the Khārijites, for example, or ignores the principle of the *hujja*. He refutes his brother and calls for the execution of anyone possessing Sulaymān's treatise. A common complaint in the *Rasā'il*, seen earlier, is that critics spread false information about the movement.⁶⁹² None of this suggests indifference. It is perhaps only on this basis, moreover, that we understand some of the striking passages in the *Rasā'il* where Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb denies some of the key aspects of his thought. On occasion, he distances himself from any association with *takfīr*:

God knows that people invent things about me that I have never said...(for example) that I pronounce *takfīr* over those who seek intercession by saints, that I pronounce *takfīr* over al-Busīrī...or, that I say that, if I were able to destroy the dome above the Prophet's mosque, then I would certainly do that...and that I prohibit visiting the grave of the Prophet and that I reject visiting the graves of parents, and others, and that I pronounce *takfīr* over those who vow in the name of other than God, and over Ibn Al-Farīd or Ibn 'Arabī... and my response to all of this is that I say 'Praise be to God! This is great slander!'⁶⁹³

But much of this is not slander at all. Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb here disowns many of the ideas that are found, and defended, elsewhere in his works. It is hard to explain this passage. But it could be the case that Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb was at times forced, in response to the claims of critics and the opposition to his movement, to conceal the true nature of his thought, disguising his most controversial positions. Though Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb was not dissuaded by the arguments of critics, as they might wish, he was sufficiently concerned and responsive to the extent of denying some of his own key teachings.

Critics dismissed Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb as a representative of the Khārijites, but this overlooks how many of his ideas were not innovative. The criticism of the cult of saints, distinction of *ulūhiyya* and *rubūbiyya*, and even the principle of secondary *takfīr* all have roots in Islamic tradition. Even major refutations, like Sulaymān's, point to areas of common ground. If there is a distinctive element to Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb, then, underlying the controversy and polemics surrounding his thought, it is his focus on external, visual dimensions of faith. He conceives of *shirk* almost exclusively in terms of its outward manifestations. His theology of action means that professing the *shahāda* counts for little if this is joined with any outward display of *shirk*. As seen earlier, he acknowledges this emphasis on externals:

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 280-84. Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission*, 40-44.

⁶⁹² 'Abdul Wahhāb. 'Rasā'il Shakhshiyya', 5/12, 33, 36-7, 58.

⁶⁹³ Ibid., 5/12 and 64.

I say that Islam is not established is not established in people until they know the meaning of ‘no god but God’ ... Yet I also say that only God knows our inner secret state ... This is all true and I openly say it.⁶⁹⁴

This is also the crux of the divide with his brother. In essence, Sulaymān insists one must look beyond the *shirk* that Muslims perform outwardly. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb this is not possible - outward actions were the very measure of faith. But it could of course be asked where outward displays of *shirk* come from if not a deeper, prior form of ‘association’ with God residing in the head and heart of the believer? On this, Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is silent. He does not engage the inner dimensions of faith. There is nothing in his works akin to a theology of love (*maḥabbā*) to explain the deeper causes or nature of *shirk*. Nor does he ever speak of the need to cleanse the heart of attachments to other than God. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb is consumed by what people do outwardly. One might argue this is a response to the state of affairs as he sees it. The *shirk* of his time was so brazen, perhaps, that a focus on externals had to take priority. We sense this in the following passage, as Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb complains that the *shirk* of his age was no less manifest than that during the time of the Prophet;

If you think that those among you appear to be following the religion of the Prophet...and have abandoned *shirk* in their words and speech, and what remains is only hidden...and that they have killed their false gods and destroyed their places worshipped in place of God, then tell me. And if you think that the *shirk* the Prophet fought was greater than this, tell me. And if you think that a person if he appears to be Muslim cannot be excommunicated, even if he worships idols, then tell me...⁶⁹⁵

A society free of *shirk*, then, is conceived as a society free of its outward manifestations, the saints, shrines, trees and other ‘idols’ seen to stand between the believer and God. The internal dimensions of faith and *shirk*, the notion of sincere belief or *shirk* residing in the head or heart of the individual, is not his concern. Everything hinges on external, visual acts. Herein lies the difference, for Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, between Muslim and *mushrik*. Herein is what makes the *shirk* of eighteenth-century Arabia even worse than that of the time of the Prophet.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 5/64.

⁶⁹⁵ ‘Abdul Wahhāb, ‘Rasā’il Shakhshiyya,’ 5/218.

Chapter V: *Shirk*, reason and colonial modernity: Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905)

Before the end of the sixteenth century, the West, thanks to its conquest of the Ocean, had succeeded in throwing a lasso round Islam’s neck; but it was not until the nineteenth century that the West ventured to pull the rope tight.⁶⁹⁶

Like Ibn Taymiya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad ‘Abduh responded to perceived threats to Islam from social and political change. The difference lay in Shaykh ‘Abduh’s attempt, like the Mu‘tazila, to articulate a view of Islam at home in a world of change and non-Muslim intellectual challenges... ‘Abduh faced challenges that differed... The late nineteenth century brought to Islam the challenges of modernity and the politically and economically powerful “West”.⁶⁹⁷

The British historian Sir Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975) writes that in the modern encounter between Islam and the West, the former “is once more facing the West with her back against the wall.”⁶⁹⁸ Others describe the Islamic world as “conscripted” onto a European-led project of modernity.⁶⁹⁹ The French invasion of Egypt by Napoleon’s forces in 1798 is said to have first opened Arab eyes to the new strength of Europe.⁷⁰⁰ The French invasion heralded the European colonisation of Islamic lands over the course of the next century. Egypt saw British military intervention in 1882 to secure control of the Suez Canal. The new reality of colonialism pervades the writings of Muslim thinkers of the period. Describing the works of the prominent Muslim reformer Rashīd Riḍā’ (d.1935), Simon Wood writes;

Whereas European and other Christians grappled with the relationship between tradition and modernity, but not in response to the humiliation and trauma of subjugation by a religious ‘other’, Rida’s writings reflect an overwhelming awareness of Muslim weakness relative to non-Muslim strength.⁷⁰¹

European colonialism was not just a political and military challenge for the Muslim world. It was also intellectual. Closely tied to the colonial project were new and confident forms of knowledge and epistemology centred around the latest findings and theories of scientific rationalism, logical positivism, Darwinian evolution and, above all, a liberal secular worldview that differentiated religion from other spheres of public life.⁷⁰² On the latter, Jurgen Habermas describes the ways in which various fields of knowledge moved apart from the authority and purview of religion in eighteenth century Europe:

⁶⁹⁶ Arnold J. Toynbee, *The World and the West* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 22.

⁶⁹⁷ Richard C. Martin, Mark S. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu‘tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 129.

⁶⁹⁸ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilisation on Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 17.

⁶⁹⁹ Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, trans. and ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27-28. The notion of Muslims being ‘conscripted’ stems originally from Talal Asad, “Conscripts of Western Civilisation” in ‘Dialectical Anthropology; Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond’, vol 1. *Civilisation in Crisis*, ed. Christine Galley (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1992); 335-51. Also David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷⁰⁰ It has been suggested that the emphasis on 1798 has been overplayed. Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism; Egypt 1760-1840* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), xi-xxxvii.

⁷⁰¹ Simon Wood, *Christian Criticisms, Islamic Proofs; Rashid Rida’s Modernist Defense of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 17.

⁷⁰² For overviews of some of these challenges and how they were engaged by Muslim scholars in secondary scholarship, see Marwa ElShakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic: 1860-1950* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013). Daniel A. Stolz, *The Lighthouse and the Observatory; Islam, Science and Empire in late Ottoman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1982).

By the end of the eighteenth century, science, morality, and art were even institutionally differentiated as realms of activity in which questions of truth, of justice, and of taste were autonomously elaborated, that is, each under its own specific aspect of validity.⁷⁰³

This was a period of great social change in the Arab world. New means of travel and communication, like the steam engine and telegraph, led to increased mobilisation of trade, people and ideas between Europe and the Arab world. The rise of the printing press in nineteenth century Egypt, introduced by Napoleon in 1798, had a profound impact upon the public access and contribution to knowledge. Print technology spawned greater rates of literacy, wider access to classical texts and the emergence of a new class of educated Muslims that were able to contest scholars' monopoly on religious discourse and thus the basis of their authority. As Skovgaard-Petersen writes:

Although the introduction of printing has attracted little interest among scholars of Islam, the period 1850-1900 is hardly understandable without due consideration of how thoroughgoing were the changes in Egypt's cultural production.⁷⁰⁴

The new technology of print also led to a mass translation movement, as western works of science, law and political theory were translated into Arabic.⁷⁰⁵ These were just some of the changes and challenges of what is called 'modernity' from the non-European, Muslim perspective. The reality of colonialism affected not just the political sphere but was felt no less deeply in the intellectual challenges and social changes that were facing Arab and Muslim societies.

There remains no single Muslim response to colonial modernity. One of the main trends can be called the 'modernist' response. This is defined as an intellectual trend that emerged in response to the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of European economic, political and military power in the late nineteenth century. This trend sought to demonstrate that what it considered 'true' Islam, that contained in the teachings of the Qur'an and *sunna*, was compatible with and even mandated the modern forms of knowledge and progress emerging from Europe. It sought to reform Islam and the Muslim community through a complex and selective engagement with both European thought and Islamic tradition. The origins of this trend are found in the late eighteenth century in the works of Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī (d. 1890) and Rifā'a al-Taḥṭāwī (d. 1873), both of whom travelled to Europe to study its social, political and educational systems up close and argued for its introduction in the Arab world on their return. In this formative period, however, European strength was perceived as largely an opportunity

⁷⁰³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 18. Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: reform, rationality and modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 69. ("Religion in pre-modern Muslim societies, very much as in medieval Europe, was characteristically not a separate segregated aspect of life but the mode in which every aspect of life, theological and otherwise, was related to the divine.")

⁷⁰⁴ Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Mufti's and Fatwas of the Dār al-Ifṭā'* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 54. Also Ami Ayalon. 'New Practices: Arab Printing, publishing and mass reading', in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer, ed. *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); 321-47. Francis Robinson. 'Technology and Religious Change: Islam and the Impact of Print', *Modern Asian Studies* 27:1 (1993); 229-251.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters*, 2nd edition (London: Saqi Books, 2011), 43-57.

for Arab growth.⁷⁰⁶ The period of 1877-82 changed this, giving what Hisham Shirabi terms a “menacing aspect” to the rise of Europe.⁷⁰⁷ Russia attacked the Ottoman Empire in 1877. Tunisia was occupied by French forces four years later. Britain, in turn, occupied Egypt in 1882.

This chapter explores the life and work of the Egyptian reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), perhaps the most influential and famous figure associated with the modernist school.⁷⁰⁸ ‘Abduh’s biography is well covered in scholarship.⁷⁰⁹ Born in 1849, ‘Abduh was a student at al-Azhar university when he became a disciple of the pan-Islamic revivalist, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897). After graduating from al-Azhar ‘Abduh became a teacher, newspaper editor and critic of European influence in Egypt. Involved in the failed ‘Urābī revolt of 1882, a nationalist uprising against the monarchy, ‘Abduh was imprisoned and later sentenced to exile. Utilising the power of print, in 1884 he moved to Paris to start a pan-Islamic journal with al-Afghānī that was critical of British imperialism, called ‘The Strongest Bond’ (*al-‘urwa al-wuthqā*). Returning to Egypt in 1886, ‘Abduh separated from al-Afghānī, allied with the British Lord Cromer (d. 1917) and focused on educational, not political reform. In 1899 he became the Chief Muffī of Egypt, its highest legal authority. Throughout this period ‘Abduh travelled frequently to Europe to discuss and spread his ideas with a range of interlocutors.⁷¹⁰ He wrote influential works, including an unfinished commentary of the Qur’an, and a modernist theological treatise, the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*. ‘Abduh also established a journal with his student, Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), that articulated his ideas of reform, *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse). He is remembered as a major voice of Islamic reform in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

There is little doubt that anyone writing about Egypt as it emerged from the nineteenth century and plunged its way into the twentieth could imagine not acknowledging the enormous contribution of Muhammad Abduh to modern Islamic thought.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁶ For a comprehensive account and translation of al-Taḥṭāwī’s account in France, see *An Imam in Paris; Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*, trans. and introduced by Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi Books, 2011). Also Abu-Lughod, *The Arab Rediscovery of Europe*, 18-27.

⁷⁰⁷ Hisham Shirabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 27.

⁷⁰⁸ For references to ‘Abduh as ‘modernist’, see Rotraud Wielandt. ‘Main trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the late Nineteenth century to the Present Times’, in Sabine Schmidtke, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 708. Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung*, (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 310-370. Harold Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam, 1895-1961* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 39-84. Charles Adams, *Islamic Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Religious Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad ‘Abduh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

⁷⁰⁹ For overviews of ‘Abduh’s biography see Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford; Oneworld, 2010); Adams, *Islam and Modernism*; Osman Amin, *Muhammad Abduh*, trans. Charles Wendell (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1953); Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 130-60; Zaki Badawi, *The Reformers of Egypt; A Critique of Al-Afghani, ‘Abduh and Ridha* (Slough; Open Press, 1976). Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014). In Arabic sources; Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, 3 volumes (Cairo: Manār Press, 1931), vol 1; Ibrāhīm al-Bayūmī and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Jawharī, ed. *Muḥammad ‘Abduh: Mi’at ‘Āmm ‘alā Raḥīlihi (1905-2005); A’māl wa-Munāqashāt al-Nadwa al-Fikriyya allatī nazzamathā maktabat al-Iskandariyya* (Al-Qāhira/Bayrūt; Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī/Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 2009).

⁷¹⁰ See for example Ammeke Kateman. ‘Tellings of an Encounter: a Meeting between Muhammad ‘Abduh, Herbet Spencer and Wilfrid Blunt (1903)’, *Philological Encounters* 3:1-2 (2018); 105-128.

⁷¹¹ Yvonne Haddad. ‘Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform’, in Ali Rahnama, ed. *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (Chicago: Zed Books, 2005), 30.

‘Abduh’s work has been elaborately discussed, embraced, repudiated, and adapted throughout the twentieth century by a wide range of secular and Islamic intellectuals that span the Arabic world and beyond. In this sense, ‘Abduh’s ideas form one of the intellectual cornerstones of modern Arabic thought.⁷¹²

For many, the importance of ‘Abduh for modern Islamic thought is clear. Charles C. Adams cites biographers who call ‘Abduh “one of the founders of modern Islam” and “one of the creators of modern Egypt.”⁷¹³ Reflecting both the scope of his influence and the new media of print communication, ‘Abduh was solicited for religious rulings from Muslims from as far as South Africa.⁷¹⁴ Others trace ‘Abduh’s influence upon later generations of reformers within and beyond the Middle East, extending to Indonesia and China.⁷¹⁵ Yet ‘Abduh’s importance is also contested. Weismann notes that ‘Abduh was only one of many Muslim reformers in his time and suggests that his influence has been exaggerated by scholars.⁷¹⁶ Others point to his perceived failure to enact any serious political or intellectual reform in Egypt or elsewhere.⁷¹⁷ ‘Abduh’s influence is debated, then, but he remains significant as a representative of the period in which he lived. In his career as a theologian, journalist, editor, political activist and traveller to Europe, perhaps no figure better reflects the changes and challenges of the age.

‘Abduh and the roots of Islamic modernism

The second half of the nineteenth century has been called “the period of the first modern globalisation.”⁷¹⁸ With closer ties between Europe and the rest of the world, driven by the new means of travel and communication, this is described as a time of heightened intellectual exchange between Europe and the Arab world. Jonathan Buessow writes that ‘Abduh’s life neatly captures this period:

Compared to earlier examples, Muhammad ‘Abduh’s life bears witness to the increased mobility of people, goods and ideas during the late nineteenth century. His travels led him to a good part of the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and Europe... In all these places, he frequented cosmopolitan circles of political emigres, anti-colonial activists and religious enthusiasts.⁷¹⁹

This means that we have two ways of reading ‘Abduh’s life and thought. On the one hand, ‘Abduh deeply engages with European thought. His writings reveal a clear readiness to draw on Europe so as

⁷¹² Ammeke Kateman, *Shared Questions, Diverging Answers: Muḥammad ‘Abduh and his interlocutors on ‘religion’ in a globalizing world* (PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2016), 18.

⁷¹³ Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 2.

⁷¹⁴ This is a reference to the famous ‘Transvaal Fatwā’ of 1903. For an overview see Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 97-99. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 100.

⁷¹⁵ See Detlev Khāled. ‘Aḥmad Amīn and the Legacy of Muḥammad ‘Abduh’, *Islamic Studies* 9:1 (1970); 1-31. Mohammad Haddad, *Essai de critique de la raison theologique; l’exemple de M. ‘Abduh* (PhD Dissertation, Universite de Paris III, 1994), 151-61. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite. ‘Taking ‘Abduh to China: Chinese-Egyptian Intellectual Contact in the Early Twentieth Century’, in J.L. Gelvin and N. Green, ed. *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 249-67.

⁷¹⁶ Itzhak Weismann. ‘The Sociology of ‘Islamic Modernism’; Muhammad ‘Abduh, the National Public Sphere and the Colonial State’, *The Maghreb Review* 32:1 (2007), 104 and 108.

⁷¹⁷ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals*, 35.

⁷¹⁸ Jonathan Buessow. ‘Re-Imagining Islam in the period of the First Modern Globalization: Muhammad Abduh and his Theology of Unity’, in Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer, ed. *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880-1940* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015); 273-320.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

to initiate reform in Egypt. Indeed ‘Abduh never hides his admiration for Europe. He speaks of travelling to Europe precisely to find knowledge and inspiration for domestic reform:

I never once went to Europe that there was not renewed within me hope of the change of the present state of Muslims to something better...whenever I returned to Europe and remained there a month or two, these hopes came back to me, and the attainment of that which I had been accounting impossible seemed easy to me.⁷²⁰

‘Abduh learnt French to gain access to Western sources.⁷²¹ As a traveller to Europe he personally visited museums, universities, the British Houses of Parliament and even met the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, while corresponding with other figures such as Leo Tolstoy.⁷²² In these letters Abduh reveals both his enthusiasm for Tolstoy’s ideas, but, equally, the intellectual connections that were now possible for European and Arab thinkers in a modern age of print and communication. ‘Abduh writes to Tolstoy:

Although I have not had the pleasure of being personally acquainted with you...the light of your thoughts has shone upon us...making a bond of friendship between the minds of the intelligent here (in Egypt) and your mind.⁷²³

‘Abduh cites the works of Voltaire, Aquinas, Tertullian, John Draper, Walter Scott and other thinkers.⁷²⁴ His personal library is said to have held Arabic and French editions of Comte, Descartes and Kant.⁷²⁵ More deeply, throughout his works ‘Abduh attempts to reconcile Islamic teachings with many of the new ideas and processes that were inspired by the European Enlightenment. In an age of scientific rationalism coming from the West, for example, ‘Abduh exalts Islam as a preeminent religion of reason and insists there is no contradiction between religion and science, reading the existence of microbes and bacteria into the Qur’anic references to *jinn*:

The scholars have said that the *jinn* are living bodies which cannot be seen. *Al-Manār* has said more than once that it is permissible to say that the minute living bodies which today have been made known by the microscope and are called ‘microbes’ may, possibly, be a species of the *jinn*...However, we Muslims are fortunately under no necessity of disputing with science...The Qur’an is too elevated in character to be in opposition to science.⁷²⁶

He does the same for the survival of the fittest (*baqā al-amthal*) theory and natural selection (*al-intikhāb al-ṭabī‘ī*).⁷²⁷ ‘Abduh affirms the existence of angels on the basis of modern science, which, he says, proves the existence of immaterial beings.⁷²⁸ It could be argued that ‘Abduh’s call for legal reform and his critique of the custom of deferring to established legal rulings, known as *taqlīd*, is shaped to some

⁷²⁰ Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 67.

⁷²¹ Mḥammad ‘Abduh. *Al-‘māl al-Kāmila li al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Amāra, 2nd edition, 5 volumes (Madīnat al-Naṣr: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006/1427), 2/329. Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 43-71.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 3/355-61 (Tolstoy) and 3/521-3 (on Spencer)

⁷²³ Riḍā. *Tārīkh*, 2/547. Cf., Buessow. ‘Re-Imagining Islam’, 278.

⁷²⁴ ‘Abduh. *Al-‘māl al-Kāmila*, 4/228 (Voltaire), 3/260 (Aquinas), 3/281 (Tertullian), 4/286 (Draper) and 3/367 (Scott).

⁷²⁵ Amin, *Muhammad ‘Abduh*, 38, n.2.

⁷²⁶ Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 138.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140. Malcolm Kerr, *Islamic Reform: the political and legal theories of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 130-1.

⁷²⁸ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, ed., Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, 14th edition (al-Qāhira: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyya, 1946/1371), 158-9. Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Iṣḥāq Musa’ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 96.

extent by the negative Enlightenment valuation of tradition.⁷²⁹ Drawing on popular European themes of moral, social and intellectual progress, ‘Abduh takes a progressive reading of history and argues that his own generation can be equal, even superior, to earlier generations in terms of acquiring knowledge:

Some of those frozen, stagnant enemies of the Qur’an have come to say; ‘indeed, earlier times were better than the later, and the end of time is about to arrive, and man has fallen into corruption...so there is now no benefit to strive and work, we must only wait (for final judgement)...(so we say) We seek refuge in God from this!’⁷³⁰

Islam insists that mere precedence in time is not a sign of knowledge, nor of superior intelligence. The preceding generations and the later generations are equal in terms of critical acumen and natural ability. Yet, the later generations have knowledge of past circumstances, and a capacity to reflect upon them, and to profit by their effects ...that their fathers and forefathers who preceded them did not have.⁷³¹

In this way ‘Abduh overturns popular notions of an inevitable decline and corruption of the times (*fasād al-zaman*), as later generations of Muslims proceed further from the age of the Prophet.⁷³² He praises the empirical method (*al-manhaj al-tajribī*) of learning pioneered by Enlightenment figures such as Francis Bacon.⁷³³ ‘Abduh views this as a main source of European progress and argues that its origins are in the intellectual contact with Arab Muslims in the Crusades.⁷³⁴ ‘Abduh writes how one European scholar, unnamed but identified as the historian Francois Guizot, attributed this change in medieval Europe to the influence of Islam.⁷³⁵ The roots of Europe’s growth, then, are read back into Muslim sources. In light of the foregoing, it is perhaps not surprising that critics perceived in ‘Abduh’s works not an attempt to reform Islam, but to Europeanise it. ‘Abduh travelled to Europe, critics wrote in the Egyptian press, but never performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁷³⁶ Indira Falk Gesink has covered this opposition to ‘Abduh in detail.⁷³⁷

This is not an exhaustive account of all the ways in which ‘Abduh engages European thought or attempts to reconcile its ideas with Islamic teachings. It suffices to offer a brief overview. But on the other hand, one cannot reduce ‘Abduh to these European influences alone. It is important to stress the degree of continuity in ‘Abduh and his deep engagement with the Islamic tradition. Firstly, ‘Abduh justifies and conceives of his modernist project as nothing but a return to the true teachings of the Qur’an and the beliefs and practices of the earliest generation of Muslims, the *salaf*. ‘Abduh writes:

⁷²⁹ William Graham. ‘Traditionalism in Islam: an Essay in Interpretation’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23:3 (1993); 497. (“It has been common in the West to see it (tradition) as explicitly negative. This negative valuation derives primarily from the European Enlightenment, which encouraged the denigration of tradition as the excess baggage of the past, an impediment to “progress” toward a scientific, rational ‘modernity’.”)

⁷³⁰ Muḥammad ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya ma’ al-‘Ilm wa al-madaniyya*, ed. Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad ‘Amāra (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma’ārif, 2013), 124.

⁷³¹ ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, 158-9 *Theology of Unity*, 127.

⁷³² For an overview of this idea of progress (*tamaddun*) and in his thought, see Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 79-80.

⁷³³ ‘Abduh. *Al-A’māl al-Kāmila*, 2/445, 3/323 and 469. ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 88.

⁷³⁴ ‘Abduh. *Al-A’māl al-Kāmila*, 3/469-70, 491. ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 88-9.

⁷³⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A’māl al-Kāmila*, 3/469-70. For the identification of Guizot, see Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 16-7. Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 112-3.

⁷³⁶ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 203-15. Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 106.

⁷³⁷ For an extensive overview see Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 169-194.

I spoke on behalf of two causes. The first of these was to liberate the mind (*tahrīr al-‘aql*) from the constraints of blind following in matters of law (*taqlīd*) and return to the understanding of faith of our righteous forefathers (*salafuna al-ṣāliḥ*), before division arose, and also to return to learn our religion from its earliest sources (the Qur’an and *sunna*).⁷³⁸

‘Abduh’s student Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) echoes his mentor and speaks of the need to;

Return the religion to its original simplicity – when even the shepherd could understand the religion as it was restricted to only the guidance of the Book (Qur’an), the *sunna* and the practice of the *salaf* – and also remove all later innovations to the religion by those who followed; this included extremism in religion, adding many innovations while making them very difficult to understand.⁷³⁹

The need to return to the original simplicity (*sadhāja*) of the Qur’an and *sunna* against later innovation (*bid‘a*) is a central theme in ‘Abduh.⁷⁴⁰ For his reason he has been called a *salafī* in scholarship, the same label applied to figures like Ibn Taymiyya and the Muḥammad ibn ‘Abduh Wahhāb.⁷⁴¹ Though contested, others specify ‘Abduh as a “modernist *salafī*” or “enlightened *salafī*”.⁷⁴² ‘Abduh’s emphasis on the place of reason (*al-‘aql*) in matters of faith, moreover, need not be seen as inspired by the rationalist discourses of Europe. It has roots internal to the Islamic tradition, as seen in the fact ‘Abduh was accused of representing the Mu‘tazilī school of theology in his time.⁷⁴³ We find traditions of rationality in Islamic intellectual history in the fields of speculative theology (*kalām*) and philosophy, and ‘Abduh speaks of studying these subjects in private classes with al-Afghānī soon after his arrival in Cairo.⁷⁴⁴ While ‘Abduh prioritises a return to the scriptural sources, his works reveal a far more complex relation to classical thinkers and texts. ‘Abduh criticises his fellow scholars, for example, for ignoring the works of the medieval Hanafi jurist al-Zaylā‘ī and attempts to reintroduce the works of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1404) to the curriculum at al-Azhar.⁷⁴⁵ An early chapter of the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, on logic, draws heavily on the creed of al-Sanūsī (d. 1490).⁷⁴⁶ Scholars note the deep influence of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and al-Shātībī (d. 1388) for ‘Abduh’s legal thought.⁷⁴⁷ Riḍā tells us that ‘Abduh considered al-

⁷³⁸ Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādḥ*, 1/11-2.

⁷³⁹ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Waḥda al-Islāmiyya wa al-Akhūwa al-Dīniyya wa Tawḥīd al-Madhāhib* (Dimaqsh: Al-Kutub al-Islāmī, n.d), 13.

⁷⁴⁰ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/360-63.

⁷⁴¹ For more on ‘Abduh as a *salafī* see Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7-8. Olivier Scharbrodt. ‘The Salafiyya and Sufism; Muhammad ‘Abduh and the Risā‘at al-Wāridāt (Treatise on Mystical Inspiration)’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70:1 (2007); 89-115. Frank Griffel. ‘What do we mean by ‘salafī’? Connecting Muhammad ‘Abduh with Egypt’s Nur party in Islam’s conceptual intellectual history’, *Die Welt des Islams* 55:2 (2015); 186-220.

⁷⁴² For ‘Modernist *salafī*’ see Joas Wagemakers. ‘Salafism’s Historical Continuity; the reception of ‘Modernist’ Salafi’s by ‘Purist’ Salafi’s in Jordan’, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30:2 (2019); 205-231. For ‘enlightened *salafī*’, see Bernard Haykel. ‘On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action’, in Roel Meijer, ed. *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 45.

⁷⁴³ See ‘Abduh’s response to this accusation in *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 2/227. ‘Abduh has been called a “neo-Mu‘tazilī” in scholarship. See R. Caspar. ‘Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne; le renouveau du mot ‘azilisme’, *Melanges de L’Institut Dominicain d’Etudes Orientales du Caire* 4 (1957), 157-72. D. Khalid. ‘Some Aspects of Neo-Mu‘tazilism’, *Islamic Studies* 8 (1969), 320-1. M. Demichelis. ‘Neo-Mu‘tazilite Theology in the Contemporary Age; the Relation between Reason, History and Tradition’, *Oriente Moderno* 90 (2010); 411-26. For an overview of arguments against this: Wielandt. ‘Main trends’, 709-12. Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 33.

⁷⁴⁴ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 2/322 and 349.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 4/191-2.

⁷⁴⁶ Amin, *Muhammad ‘Abduh*, 38. ‘Abduh cites al-Sanūsī directly in his works. See *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/334.

⁷⁴⁷ Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 80, 84, 86-7. David Commins, *Islamic Reform: politics and social change in late Ottoman Syria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 160, n.43.

Shātibī's *al-Muwāfaqāt* the best work of Muslim legal theory.⁷⁴⁸ While 'Abduh accepts many of Europe's modernising features, moreover, he rejects the prescription of liberal secularism and the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Defending the public role of Islam, he writes that secularism led to growth in Europe but it did not account for Muslims' very different historical experience;

Muslims have never encountered at any stage in their long history something like the Papacy in Europe, nor were they ever exposed to a Pope-like figure who could and did exert power to remove Kings and banish princes, extract taxes and decree Divine laws, all on behalf of the Christian communities.⁷⁴⁹

The point is not to explore this in detail. It is to note, briefly, that 'Abduh is equally rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, engaging trends, thinkers and arguments from the classical heritage that serve his reformist project.

We therefore have two ways of reading 'Abduh. He engages both European thought and different trends from Islamic tradition. This seems to have led to a historiographical tension in scholarship, with 'Abduh described by a range of varying epithets, from modernist and Mu'tazilī to *salafī*.⁷⁵⁰ A common theme in some works, well represented but not exclusive to Albert Hourani, is to depict 'Abduh's modernism as representing a 'break' from the classical Islamic tradition. According to this narrative 'Abduh departs from the tradition to make Islam amenable to the modern age. In engaging European thought, Hourani writes:

...It was, of course, easy in this way to distort if not destroy the precise meaning of Islamic concepts, that which distinguishes Islam from other religions...It was perhaps this of which his conservative critics were uneasily aware. There was bound to be something arbitrary in the selection and the approximation. Once the traditional interpretation of Islam was abandoned...it was difficult if not impossible to say what was in accordance with Islam and what was not.⁷⁵¹

This is an overly reductive or narrow impression of 'Abduh's thought, emphasising his modernism and overlooking his engagement with Islamic tradition. More deeply, it reveals an essentialised or static understanding of Islamic 'tradition', from which 'Abduh's modernism is seen as a departure. Against this, Samira Haj argues that Islamic tradition is not something static, fixed and unchanging, but is rather flexible and dynamic. Islam, she writes, is a 'discursive tradition' in which successive generations of thinkers selectively draw on different thinkers, arguments and trends from the Islamic tradition in light of their contemporary relevance. Haj writes:

Tradition is not simply the recapitulation of previous beliefs and practices, rather, each successive generation confronts its particular problems via an engagement with a set of ongoing arguments. In constructing their arguments, Muhammad 'Abduh...had to argue from within the tradition. This does not mean...(he was) mimicking the past...(Rather he was) attempting to make persuasive arguments for the

⁷⁴⁸ Ridā', *Tārīkh al-Ustādih*, 1/516.

⁷⁴⁹ 'Abduh. *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, 3/249-50. C.f. Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 93.

⁷⁵⁰ For an overview of these trends in scholarship, see Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 24-33.

⁷⁵¹ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 144. For a similar view: Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton: Wiener, 2000), 271. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities*, 3rd edition (London: Verso, 1999), 121. Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 13. Shirabi, *Arab Intellectuals*, *passim*.

present by referring to a past and to an authoritative corpus...Islamic tradition is not fixed but is constantly changing..⁷⁵²

In this way, Haj offers a nuanced reading of how ‘Abduh’s engagement with both European and Islamic sources is not a betrayal of Islamic tradition. It is, rather, constitutive of the inherent dynamism of that tradition.⁷⁵³ In the same vein, depictions of ‘Abduh as either Mu‘tazilī or *salafī* raise issues of definition and meaning that risk reducing him to a singular tradition, overlooking the complex ways that he draws on European and Islamic thought. If this chapter describes ‘Abduh as a modernist, it is not in the sense of Hourani. This term is chosen to convey ‘Abduh’s readiness to draw on European thought, but does not presume a ‘break’ with the classical tradition as such. Nor is ‘Abduh unique in attempting to fuse Islamic tradition with the challenges of colonial modernity, as the group of Ottoman reformers, centred around the figure of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d.1914), attest.⁷⁵⁴ This chapter now turns to explore some of the key features of ‘Abduh’s theology.

A theology of reason (*‘aql*) and worldly progress

Examining ‘Abduh’s theology is a challenge. The modern researcher of ‘Abduh faces several obstacles. First, ‘Abduh’s writing style is highly scholastic, dense and impenetrable. His ideas are seldom presented in a clear, systematic fashion, and he avoids discussing his most important and consequential ideas in any depth, explaining this as a desire to preserve unity and avoid division among Muslims.⁷⁵⁵ Second, there are perennial questions over the textual basis for studying ‘Abduh’s theology. We find intensive debates over the authorship of two treatises published under ‘Abduh’s name: the *Risālat al-Wāridāt fī sirr al-tajalliyāt* and *al-Ta‘līqāt ‘alā sharḥ al-Dawānī li-l-‘aqā’id al-‘aḍudiyya*.⁷⁵⁶ The former in particular is a theosophical treatise that expounds a cosmology rooted in the concept of the unity of existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). It would seem that these works cannot be attributed to ‘Abduh, however, and were delivered as lectures by his mentor, al-Afghānī, only copied and edited by ‘Abduh.⁷⁵⁷ There is also the challenge of separating ‘Abduh from his student, Rashīd Riḍā. Mohammad Haddad has revealed the editorial strategies by which Riḍā shaped ‘Abduh’s corpus and legacy after his death. In several studies, Haddad points to the ways that Riḍā selected, edited and published ‘Abduh’s works, adding footnotes and introductions, expanding some texts while neglecting others and writing a

⁷⁵² Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 6-7.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1-30, 70-71, 99-107, 188-203.

⁷⁵⁴ For more on this group of Ottoman *salafī* reformers, see Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 49-104. Iztchak Weismann, *A Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafīyya and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); *idem.*, “Genealogies of Fundamentalism: Salafī Discourse in 19th century Baghdad”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36 (2009); 69-82; *idem.*, “Between Sufi reformism and Modernist rationalism – a reappraisal of the origins of the salafīyya from the Damascene angle”, *Die Welt des Islams* (2001); 206-37. Mun‘im Sirry, ‘Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī and the Salafī Approach to Sufism’, *Die Welt des Islams* 51 (2011): 75-108. For a study of the overlaps between this Ottoman group of reformers and ‘Abduh, J. H. Escovitz, “He was the Muhammad ‘Abduh of Syria”; a study of Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī and his influence’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1986); 293-310.

⁷⁵⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/353.

⁷⁵⁶ For an overview of this debate, see Wielandt. ‘Main Trends’, 716-19.

⁷⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 719. For the contrary view, see Scharbrodt. ‘The Salafīyya and Sufism’, 89-115.

biography of his teacher, to present an image of ‘Abduh that matched his own intellectual interests.⁷⁵⁸ Following the findings of Haddad, Rotraud Wielandt writes; “henceforth information provided by Riḍā concerning ‘Abduh’s theology cannot be relied on any more.”⁷⁵⁹ For this reason, the following study of ‘Abduh is based on the edited collection of Muḥammad ‘Amāra, largely avoiding the *al-Manār* journal, and focusing on ‘Abduh’s most famous theological work, the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*.

Two key features of ‘Abduh’s theology are central to this chapter. The first is his stress on the primacy of reason (*al-‘aql*) in faith. This has received considerable attention in scholarship.⁷⁶⁰ Throughout his writings ‘Abduh repeatedly exalts Islam as the preeminent religion of reason, insisting that the Qur’an encourages the use of reason to think about revelation and the laws and principles that govern the universe. The following passages neatly capture the spirit of ‘Abduh’s works.

In its call to believe in the existence of God, Islam depends only on arousing human reason (*al-‘aql*), and directing it to consider the universe and to use correct analogy from this, returning to the order and arrangement of the universe, its causes and effects, in order to reach a view that the world has one necessarily existent, all-knowing, wise and omnipotent maker (*ṣāna ‘a*).⁷⁶¹

The Qur’an directs us, with the power of reason and intellectual enquiry, to the signs of the universe and, as much as possible, into its particulars, to come to certainty with respect to things in which it guides.⁷⁶²

Reason alone is able to discern many truths on its own, including the existence and some attributes of God. Revelation, then, comes to confirm (*taḥbīt*) the findings of reason.⁷⁶³ It also clarifies aspects, like the ritual acts of worship, that lie beyond the purview of reason.⁷⁶⁴ If reason did not precede revelation in discerning the existence of God, ‘Abduh writes, there would be no basis to accept the authority of revelation at all.⁷⁶⁵ ‘Abduh also makes a rational case for the proof of prophecy based on the inimitability of the Qur’an.⁷⁶⁶ Invoking the universal rule (*al-qānūn al-kullī*) of al-Rāzī (d. 1209), he asserts the precedence of reason over the literal meaning of scripture in cases of conflict between the two:

There is general agreement among Muslims that in case of any conflict between reason and the evident reading of revelation (*naql*), the conclusions arrived at by reason are given preference, leaving two options for the reading of revelation. The first is to delegate (*tafwīd*) the meaning of the text to God. The second is to re-interpret the text rationally, in line with the well-known rules of language.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁵⁸ Haddad, *Essai de critique*, 79-82, 99f, 130-40; “Les Oevres de ‘Abduh, histoire de’une manipulation”, *IBLA (Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes)*, 60/180 (1997), 197-222; “‘Abduh et ses lecteurs”, *Arabica* (1998), 24-30. See also Oliver Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha’i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abduh-Baha ‘Abbas* (London: Routledge, 2008), 107-8. Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 122.

⁷⁵⁹ Wielandt. ‘Main Trends’, 719.

⁷⁶⁰ J. W. Livingston. ‘Muḥammad ‘Abduh on Science’, *Muslim World* 85:3-4 (1995), 224-8. Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: a work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 106-114. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 111-126. Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 172-5 and 177-180.

⁷⁶¹ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 54. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 128-9.

⁷⁶² ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 21. See also 30-33, 52-54, 91-2, 126-7, 150-4; *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 58-9, 82-5, 114, 126.

⁷⁶³ ‘Abduh. *Risāla*, 54-60.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-60.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.* ‘Abduh, *Al-A ‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/425-6.

⁷⁶⁷ ‘Abduh. *Risāla*, 59-60. ‘Abduh, *Al-A ‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/451.

‘Abduh argues that reason is no less a divine gift than revelation itself. Man is a “rational being” (*kawn ‘aqlī*), he writes, with reason part of his natural, God-given constitution (*fiṭra*).⁷⁶⁸ It is on this basis that ‘Abduh sees no conflict between reason, religion and science. With reason and revelation both creations of God, Islam cannot oppose the major product of human reason - the findings of modern science.

God has sent down two books: one created, which is nature. And one revealed, which is the Qur’an. The latter leads us to investigate the former by means of the intelligence which was given to us. He who obeys will become blessed; he who turns away, goes toward destruction.⁷⁶⁹

This explains ‘Abduh’s readiness to read modern scientific findings into the Qur’an. He thus insists that Islam is unique among religions in grounding belief solely on the basis of rational proof (*dalīl ‘aqlī*).⁷⁷⁰

Much of this celebration of reason, however, takes only the form of general admonitions or principles. There is little specific in ‘Abduh beyond a general call to return to the Qur’an and to engage the text rationally. Elsewhere, his trust in reason is limited. On a range of dogmatic issues, he refuses to discuss in detail how reason and revelation relate to each other and seems acutely aware of the limits of reason. Reason affirms the existence and attributes of God, for example, but ‘Abduh offers the qualification:

Speculation about the essence of the Creator... is an attempt to probe that which is forbidden to reason...the pursuit of His essence is beyond the grasp of human faculties. It is foolish and dangerous, foolish because it is a search for what is unattainable, dangerous because it is a strike against faith in that it attempts to define what cannot be defined... As for His attributes... it is sufficient to know God has these attributes. Anything beyond this, God has concealed and it is not possible for reason to attain it.⁷⁷¹

Reason is not just limited, then, but its overuse is an act against the faith. ‘Abduh also forecloses rational enquiry into the nature of the soul and the question of free-will versus divine predestination.⁷⁷² Once the truth of prophecy is proven on rational grounds, moreover, he writes that one must accept all the prophets’ message, even if it is not understood.⁷⁷³ ‘Abduh stresses the place of reason and its harmony with revelation, then, but also insists on its limits and refuses to engage the complexities or implications of this argument. Roxanne Euben suggests that ‘Abduh did not wish to confuse his readers on issues they may not understand.⁷⁷⁴ Others write that ‘Abduh avoids fully discussing his theology of reason due to the desire, often stated in his works, to avoid complex and controversial issues that would only divide Muslims.⁷⁷⁵ But there is a tension in ‘Abduh, perhaps, between his emphasis on Muslim unity, on the one hand, and his insistence elsewhere that all Muslims must exercise their reason to independently engage the Qur’an to reach their own conclusions:

In its general call to understand, comprehend and reach certainty regarding the contents of the Qur’an, Islam commanded that every believer take knowledge from God’s book and His law. It finds all men

⁷⁶⁸ ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 2/161-2.

⁷⁶⁹ Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 136.

⁷⁷⁰ ‘Abduh, *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 56.

⁷⁷¹ ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 50. *Theology of Unity*, 55. C.f. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 110. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 119.

⁷⁷² ‘Abduh, *Al-Amāl al-Kāmila*, 3/222 and 4/411. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 118-120.

⁷⁷³ Wielandt. ‘Main Trends’, 722.

⁷⁷⁴ Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 111.

⁷⁷⁵ Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 116-7.

equally able to do this – so long as they reach the requisite level of understanding. This is easy to attain for the great majority of Muslims. It is not limited to a particular class, or a particular time.⁷⁷⁶

This reveals a high trust in the rational capacity of believers. But calling for individual engagement with the Qur'an risks, perhaps, precisely the kind of intra-Muslim division that 'Abduh hopes to avoid.⁷⁷⁷ 'Abduh is silent on this and it is not clear if he explains, or even recognises, this tension.

'Abduh's support for reason in religion is only vague and general, then, eschewing complex areas while raising questions that are left unaddressed. It could be argued this is because 'Abduh's theology is itself rooted in entirely practical, pragmatic concerns. It has a specific, reformist function. In a specific sense, 'Abduh emphasises the use of reason in religion to critique the legal practice of *taqlīd*, the custom of deferring to established legal rulings. For 'Abduh, this means the acceptance of inherited beliefs without the full exercise of reason. He condemns *taqlīd* as contrary to the injunctions of the Qur'an and considers it a major source of Muslim stagnancy and decline:

Islam will not tolerate *taqlīd*, against which it campaigns relentlessly to break its power of men's minds and to eradicate its deep-seated influence...Islam alerts and arises the power of reason in man, out of a long sleep. Islam declares that man was not created to be led by a halter. He was endowed with intelligence to take knowledge and be guided by science and by the signs of the universe.⁷⁷⁸

'Abduh's criticism of *taqlīd*, his attempts at legal reform and his modernist legal theory have been addressed in detail in scholarship.⁷⁷⁹ In a more general sense, 'Abduh's emphasis on the role of reason in Islam serves his reformist project by empowering Muslims without splitting this from the realm of faith. For 'Abduh, it means that Muslims can be open to new forms of knowledge, seek worldly progress and remain firmly rooted and faithful in their religion. Wael Hallaq alludes to this in the following summary;

The elevation of reason to a fairly independent position, has, to be sure, a pragmatic function in 'Abduh's theory. It allows the individual to determine for himself what is good and what is bad behaviour, and at the same time, it enables this rational capacity to make such distinctions in an organic relationship with the effects of revelation.⁷⁸⁰

If 'Abduh refuses to explore the complexities of the relation of reason and revelation, then, it is because this does not serve his reformist project. 'Abduh's use of reason in faith does not aim to be systematic. It is driven by the need to lay out a basis for modern Muslim reform. Complex theological questions that emerge from this and distract from these aims are either dismissed or left unaddressed.

This leads to the second feature of 'Abduh's theology. It is axiomatic for 'Abduh that Islam, properly understood, leads to worldly progress. The sociologist of religion Abdulkader Tayob describes 'Abduh

⁷⁷⁶ 'Abduh, *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, 3/471.

⁷⁷⁷ For a critique of 'Abduh as opening the doors to a wide range of subjective interpretation of religion and thus leading to "interpretive chaos", see Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 7. Also Indira Falk Gesink. 'Chaos on the Earth': Subjective Truths versus Communal Unity in Islamic law in Militant Islam', *The American Historical Review* 108:3 (2002); 710-33.

⁷⁷⁸ 'Abduh, *Risāla*, 23. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 130.

⁷⁷⁹ For an extensive overview see Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 77-90 and footnotes contained therein.

⁷⁸⁰ Wael Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories; an Introduction to Sunni Uṣūl al-fīqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 212.

as an example of a “functionalist” approach to religion in the modern period whereby Islam is defined above all by its social and political ends.⁷⁸¹ Tayob writes that, for ‘Abduh, the real of meaning of Islam as a rational religion is that Islam is no impediment to material progress. Islam serves as a basis for a progressive and modern Muslim society. Tayob notes the sharp difference on this point between ‘Abduh and classical writers:

The goals of religion in pre-modern discussions always reverted to its value for individual fulfilment and salvation ultimately in another world. The political was merely a means to higher goals that lay elsewhere in time and space. Under a modern new theology, however, (like ‘Abduh’s) one could not even imagine that religion might not always be beneficial in society...that religious values might not always be conducive to social and political progress was unthinkable...Islam was inextricably tied to its worldly success and value....the truth of Islam had to be continually proved in its success in the world here and now, or at least in the achievements of Muslims in the past.⁷⁸²

This is a neat characterisation of ‘Abduh. Islam as a religion of reason, then, is closely linked to socio-political progress and reform. This is clear in his insistence on the harmony between religion and science. It is also seen in ‘Abduh’s stress that Islam poses no obstacle to learn more about the natural world and even encourages the pursuit of such learning.⁷⁸³ One sees this in ‘Abduh’s treatment of Islamic history. ‘Abduh views the achievements of Islamic history as a direct and logical result of the religion. With the arrival of Islam, ‘Abduh writes, the “power of reason was released” (*fa-aṭlaqa bi-hadhā sulṭān al-‘aql*) and reason “returned to its kingdom” (*wa-raddahu ilā mamlakatihī*).⁷⁸⁴ The result was the emergence of a civilisation founded on learning and justice to an degree unknown in history:

Islam emerged, both its spirit and practice... And it civilised the barbarians through its schools. It taught not to ‘give to Caesar what is Caesar’s’ but rather made Caesar himself accountable for his actions. This religion guided the lost, softened the harsh, taught the ignorant and alarmed the idle... It reformed the ethics of the corrupt and united the divided...It established justice, reformed the laws and established systems for those who entered it that far exceeded all what preceded it...This religion was a blessing for its people in all its affairs.⁷⁸⁵

This is why the rapid spread of Islam, he adds, was “unknown in the history of religions.”⁷⁸⁶ As noted, a common theme is to attribute the strength of Europe to Muslim sources. Europe progressed from the Middle Ages, ‘Abduh writes, only after discovering the virtues of independent will, thought and opinion (*istiqlāl al-irāda wa istiqlāl al-ra’y wa al-fikr*).⁷⁸⁷ This came via contact with Muslims in the Crusades, from whom Europe learnt that “freedom of thought and striving for knowledge were a means to faith, not against faith” (*hurriyat al-fikr wa-si‘at al-‘ilm wasā’il al-īmān lā al-‘awādī ‘alayhi*).⁷⁸⁸ The strength of Europe, then, is itself a testament to the social and political benefit of Islam.⁷⁸⁹

⁷⁸¹ Abdulkader Tayob, *Religion in Modern Islamic Discourses* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009), 17.

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, 70-1.

⁷⁸³ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/447.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3/469.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 3/240. Also 3/250, 443-6, 450, 453-6, 458-70.

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3/485.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 3/240.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3/491.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3/219-20, 232, 469-70, 491. See also ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 53.

‘Abduh makes deeper or more specific doctrinal claims to assert Islam as a source of worldly progress. The notion of the transcendence (*tanzīh*) of God, which is intrinsic to the doctrine of *tawhīd*, he argues, in itself encourages progress. Divine transcendence puts man in the direct vicinity of God, encouraging striving and effort by making the believer solely accountable for their acts:

Islam leads the servant directly to God, giving him the right to stand before God alone without any intermediary. Islam decreed that all created beings stand in servitude to none but the Omnipotent (*al-qāhīr*). The only barrier between the believer and God is his acts. This is how Islam, understood correctly (*al-islām al-ṣaḥīḥ*) lifts the servant to reach higher stages of perfection (*marātib al-kamāl*).⁷⁹⁰

In its doctrinal teachings and historical record, then, Islam leads to worldly success. This also means the current weakness and division of the Muslim world is not only removed from Islam. More deeply for ‘Abduh, it is the essential opposite of Islam. In many passages ‘Abduh insists that the majority of Muslims have deviated from the true message and principles of the faith.⁷⁹¹

You see today that what is called ‘Islam’ is not really Islam. It is only the preservation of some ritual actions like prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage, or the retention of certain expressions, even though the meanings of these have also been corrupted. People have led their religion to innovations and superstitions (*al-kharāfāt*) and thus to stagnation (*jumūd*)... We seek refuge in God from them and from whoever speaks falsehood of God and His religion! Everything that is defective today among Muslims is not from Islam, rather it is from something else that has been called ‘Islam.’⁷⁹²

The roots of the malaise are many. While the Qur’an commands the use of reason, he claims, many Muslims follow superstition (*al-kharāfāt*) and whim (*hawā*).⁷⁹³ ‘Abduh presents Islam as a religion of doctrinal unity (*al-dīn al-islāmī dīn tawhīd al-al-‘aqā’id lā dīn tafriq fī al-qawā’id*), but regrets that Islamic history is full of theological and political Muslim division.⁷⁹⁴ Many Muslims, he regrets, accept the innovation (*bid‘a*) that reason is not compatible with revelation and that religion is an enemy of science (*al-dīn min ashadd ‘adā’ al-‘ilm*).⁷⁹⁵ The point is to stress that ‘Abduh links the social and political weakness of Muslims in direct proportion to their deviation from the principles of Islam. Seen from a different angle, this may also challenge the claims of Hourani that ‘Abduh is concerned not with proving the doctrinal truth of Islam, but its compatibility to the modern world. Hourani writes:

Polemics have their danger; in defending oneself, one may draw closer to one’s adversary’s than one thinks. It is significant that both his (‘Abduh’s) controversies were concerned not with the truth or falsity of Islam, but with its being compatible with the supposed requirements of the modern mind.⁷⁹⁶

Yet this rests on a false distinction. Against Hourani, a stronger reading is to suggest that ‘Abduh insists so forcefully upon Islam as a source of progress precisely to prove its doctrinal truth. The truth of Islam, for ‘Abduh, is measured and manifest by its amenability to modern knowledge, learning and progress.

⁷⁹⁰ Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila.*, 3/233.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3/465-9.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, 3/341.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, 2/159-61.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3/390.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3/474 and 470-1. For an overview of ‘Abduh’s critique see Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 99-108. Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 59, 66-7, 75, 86, 232-33.

⁷⁹⁶ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 144-5.

On *shirk* or ‘association’ with God

‘Abduh can therefore be considered a political theologian in the sense that he insists upon the social and political value of Islam. ‘Abduh’s theology is tied to its social and political benefit. This is perhaps not surprising. Debates over the rationality, relevance and public role of religion were central to European discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the latter half of the nineteenth century, these debates reached a global, non-European audience. Ammeke Kateman describes these as some of the “shared questions” over the category and meaning of religion between ‘Abduh and his European interlocutors.⁷⁹⁷ Albert Hourani again writes:

His (‘Abduh’s) intellectual problems were those of Islamic thought but they were also those of nineteenth century Europe, in particular the great debates about science and religion...Islam seemed to him to be a middle path between the two extremes: a religion fully consistent with the claims of the human intellect and the discoveries of modern science, but safeguarding the divine transcendence...Islam indeed was...the answer to the problems of the modern world.⁷⁹⁸

‘Abduh contributes to this debate, stressing the rationality and the worldly value of Islam. He uses reason in the service of religion, not in opposition to religion, and thus offers an Islamic conception of rationalism and progress. Presenting Islam as a source of socio-political progress, he contests the secular European conception of religion as a purely private affair, removed from political or communal affairs. In this way ‘Abduh carves a distinct place and role for Islam in his age of colonial modernity.

This chapter turns to explore ‘Abduh’s treatment of the concept of *shirk* or ‘association’ with God. Only after examining his conception of Islam as a religion of reason and worldly progress does his treatment of *shirk* make sense. To date, there has been no scholarship on the place of *shirk* in ‘Abduh’s works. What follows is a close reading of the relevant sources. This lacuna is explained in a number of ways. Firstly, ‘Abduh’s treatment of the concept of *shirk* appears scattered, spread across a range of different contexts that do not, at first, seem connected in any meaningful sense. Another reason is the common presumption that ‘Abduh does not engage with the concept at all. We find this across several studies:

In his *Risālah al-Tawhīd* he (‘Abduh) is more concerned with the power of reason, its relation with revelation, prophecy, man’s free-will and free act and the like, than with questions of *imān*, *kufr* and *shirk*, which occupied an important place in the works of the classical theologians.⁷⁹⁹

(The *Risāla*) deals with issues such as liberty, independent reasoning, and self-help that were never the concern of the traditional ulema, often using concepts derived from nineteenth century European thought ...that Muslims of earlier centuries would have had difficulty in comprehending. The contrast between Muhammad Abduh’s work and traditional Muslim scholarship is absolute.⁸⁰⁰

Against this, this chapter demonstrates that concept of *shirk* remains important for ‘Abduh. He discusses the concept in his works but does so in a different way that is not, perhaps, always readily apparent.

⁷⁹⁷ Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 15-18.

⁷⁹⁸ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 143-4.

⁷⁹⁹ Harun Nasution, *The Place of Reason in ‘Abduh’s Theology: Its Impact on His Theology System and Views* (Unpublished PhD dissertation: McGill University, 1968), 12.

⁸⁰⁰ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 68.

‘Abduh often uses the term *wathaniyya*, for example, derived from the term for idol, *wathan*. Also, his discussion of *shirk* is often only implicit in his works. The key here is the stress on Islam as a rational religion. With Islam linked to reason, *shirk* becomes tied to notions of irrationality and superstition in religion. If Islam extols the powers of reason, as ‘Abduh insists, *shirk* is defined by the suspension of reason. This theme runs implicitly throughout his works. To return to Tayob:

‘Abduh thought of religion as an essential and powerful human quality. It thrived in the presence of rational development, but led to unfortunate consequences when irrationalism held sway...there was a close and symbiotic relationship between religion and reason.⁸⁰¹

‘Abduh discusses the meaning and nature of *shirk* through his condemnation of the irrational in religion. This also means that *shirk* is a political concept for ‘Abduh: *shirk* is both irrational and, following this, a source of backwardness and decline. *Shirk* is an obstacle to progress. The two are inverse and cannot be separated. While ‘Abduh’s treatment of *shirk* often appears scattered, then, expressed in different ways and across a range of works, this reading of *shirk* as both irrational and a source of socio-political decline is the common underpinning throughout.

‘Abduh’s Theology of Religious History

‘Abduh’s account of religious history and prophecy, for example, reveals a discourse of *tawhīd* and *shirk* that is expressed through a lens of reason and irrationality. ‘Abduh’s view on the relation between Islam and other religions is ambivalent. At times, he expresses the traditional Muslim view that the “religion of *tawhīd*” is the true religion of all prophets. ‘Abduh writes how all the prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, preached the same essential message of the oneness and transcendence of God:

Islam came to call people to *tawhīd*...(this is) the religion of God (*dīn Allāh*), from Adam, Noah, Abraham to Moses, then the prophets after Moses, including the seal of the Israelite prophets, Jesus....(All of these prophets) called for nothing a but a return to the worship of God alone, and to liberate them from the authority (*sulṭa*) of leaders and rulers who assaulted man’s reason.⁸⁰²

The message of earlier prophets was corrupted by later followers, he adds, and only the message of Muhammad, correctly understood, represents the true religion of God (*dīn Allāh*).⁸⁰³ To this, however, ‘Abduh adds a distinctly modernist reading of religious history and prophecy in the *Risālat al-Tawhīd*. Abduh presents the series of revelations from Judaism to Christianity to Islam as an evolutionary process of divine education and rational growth in man.⁸⁰⁴ The strict legal rules of the Old Testament, he writes, reflect the carnal and primitive impulses of man at an early stage of his development. At this stage man did not perceive anything beyond his senses.⁸⁰⁵ Man then reached a higher stage, moving beyond the senses to develop an internal consciousness (*wijdān*). The Gospel reflects this later stage,

⁸⁰¹ Tayob, *Religion*, 58.

⁸⁰² ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/232.

⁸⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 3/472-474.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3/473.

appealing to emotions and sensitivities.⁸⁰⁶ Mankind then reached a final stage of intellectual maturity (*rushd*). The Qur'an thus addressed our reason and comprehension (*al-fahm*):

Human society then reached a point when man reached his full stature. Islam supervened to present its case to reason...to call on mind and intelligence for action, alongside emotion and feeling, for mans guidance towards earthly and heavenly bliss...Islam deals with man as a wide and sober teacher would deal with a mature person, summoning him to his full powers...When will anything comparable be found in other religions, where reason goes awry and there is no way clear way to the pure secrets of divine oneness and transcendence (*al-tawhīd wa al-tanzīh*)?⁸⁰⁷

This is why Muhammad is the seal of the prophets. Since we have developed our rational capacity and the Qur'an enjoins us to do this, 'Abduh writes, there is no need for revelation after the Qur'an:

When one has sound training, does one need a mentor? No! For the true has been distinguished by the false and all that remains is to follow the guidance and from the hands of mercy take the way that brings one to happiness in the here and hereafter. For this reason, Muhammad's prophecy brought prophecy itself to an end. His message terminated the work of the messengers.⁸⁰⁸

It is unlikely that 'Abduh takes this evolutionary model of prophecy from the classical tradition.⁸⁰⁹ More likely, this is a gloss of Comte's law of three stages, a progressive view of history that envisioned a childish religious stage, an adolescent metaphysical stage and a final, 'developed' stage of reason and science.⁸¹⁰ But the key is the link, once again, between Islam and reason. 'Abduh presents the message of the Qur'an and the doctrine of *tawhīd* to reflect the highest stage of man's rational development.

This implies, of course, that the doctrine of *shirk* is linked to the failure of reason. This is clear when 'Abduh discusses the history of idolatry. 'Abduh links evolutionary notions of moral and intellectual progress to the doctrinal victory of monotheism over idolatry. While the prophets are those perfected souls chosen by God, 'Abduh writes, later communities failed to fully understand and thus corrupted their message of *tawhīd* due to the weakened, immature states of their intellect. It was this that led them to worship a host of other things in place of God:

Some were led to the animal kingdom.... Others sought the stars and planets and its effects. Others see it in the trees and rocks. Others again have divinised special powers belonging to diverse species...But whenever feelings have been refined and thinking grown more subtle and awareness more penetrating, these (false) ideas have been transcended.⁸¹¹

⁸⁰⁶ 'Abduh, *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, 3/473-4. 'Abduh, *Risāla*, 166-7. *Theology of Unity*, 132-3. ("When religions first began, men understood their well-being only in a most rudimentary way, like infants when first born...the great grace of God is in His handling his people like children, like a parent with a child...Religions (i.e. Judaism) took men and gave them straight commands and firm restraints, to which they required utmost obedience...(Later) people were prompted to deeper sensitivity and self-awareness...A religion came (Christianity) which spoke to these feelings...making its appeal to the gentle arts of the heart. It laid down sacred laws of asceticism, drawing them away from the world and towards the higher life...it barred the doors of heaven to the rich.")

⁸⁰⁷ 'Abduh, *Risāla*, 167-8. *Theology of Unity*, 134-6.

⁸⁰⁸ 'Abduh, *Risāla*, 171. *Theology of Unity*, 140.

⁸⁰⁹ A point made in Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 110. But Buessow suggests that 'Abduh draws on the ideas of the Mu'tazilite litterateur 'Amr b. Baḥr al-Jāhiz (d. 869). See Buessow. 'Re-imagining Islam', 286-7.

⁸¹⁰ G. Lenzer, ed. *Auguste Comte on Positivism: The Essential Writings* (New Brunswick, 1998), 34-42. For Comte's influence upon 'Abduh see Buessow. 'Re-imagining Islam', 287.

⁸¹¹ 'Abduh, *Risāla*, 103-4. *The Theology of Unity*, 90-1. Referring no doubt to the Greek philosophers, 'Abduh mentions those who came close to attaining true knowledge of God on their own but, without revelation, "many aspects of Divinity remained hidden to them." Nor did these philosophers have the powerful quality of prophecy to carry their people with them, 'Abduh

‘Abduh uses the term *wathaniyya* to describe the idol worship of earlier times, not *shirk*. He defines *wathaniyya* as the worship of tangible objects (*al-mawjūdāt al-mādiyya*), visible objects (*al-mawjūdāt al-mashūda*) and stone statues (*tamāthīl hijriyya*).⁸¹² Noting that this kind of idolatry or *wathaniyya* characterised the religions of the ancient Greeks and Egyptians, ‘Abduh explains this by arguing for the weakened intellects of the masses in these earlier generations:

So, we see that it was the weakness of reason (*da’af al-aql*), the scarcity of knowledge (*qillat al-‘ilm*) and lack of insight (*idrāk*) among those who believe in these kinds of intermediaries (in worship). However, armed with reason (*al-‘aql*), the power of spiritual vision (*baṣīra*) and the use of knowledge, followers are always able to reach the true reality of existence, which shines upon everything.⁸¹³

Ancient Greek and Egyptian philosophers knew the falsity of idol worship and had some knowledge of divine transcendence (*tanzīh*), ‘Abduh writes, but had to keep this knowledge from the masses.⁸¹⁴ While this kind of idol worship can be proven false by reason alone, ‘Abduh insists, it is still found in places like Africa or India.⁸¹⁵ This is, of course, a highly critical judgement against African animist or Hindu religious belief and practice. ‘Abduh rejects outright the notion that these could be rich and sophisticated traditions. The crux of the issue is that man’s rational development parallels his doctrinal turn towards monotheism. The history and reality of idol worship, in turn, is rooted in a lack of reason and intellect.

This extends to ‘Abduh’s engagement with another religious category; the group of opponents of the Prophet called the *mushrikūn* in the Qur’an. ‘Abduh discusses the Arabs of pre-Islamic Arabia in terms that strengthen the link between idols and irrationality. ‘Abduh refers to this group not by their Qur’anic title of *mushrikūn*, but *wathaniyyūn*.⁸¹⁶ This reflects the traditional image of wooden and stone idolatry said to be widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia. ‘Abduh specifies *wathaniyya* as prevalent in the time of revelation (*zaman al-tanzīl*).⁸¹⁷ For ‘Abduh, the pre-Islamic idolaters were, above all, irrational.

The Arab nation consisted of various tribes, sundered by conflicts and enslaved by passions. Each tribe gloried in wars with its neighbour, capturing women folk, killing chieftains and pillaging land. Greed inspired these perpetual battles. With this decay went every sort of evil. But so low did the Arab’s intelligence sink (*sukhāf al-‘aql*) that they even made sugar idols and worshipped them, then ate them after that when they were hungry.⁸¹⁸

This, ‘Abduh tells us, was the essence of pre-Islamic idolatry. The *mushrikūn* worshipped idols because of their lack of reason. Following this, it seems symptomatic of ‘Abduh that he distinguishes the Prophet in his milieu as much for his rational skills as his moral character:

His (Muhammad’s) contemporaries had grown up in the days of *jāhiliyya* and his companions were sworn idolaters (*wathaniyyūn*). He was among the patrons and servants of images; his own relatives

explains, thus explaining why the masses of ancient Greece still worshipped idols in spite of the rare insights of the Philosophers. See ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 104-5.

⁸¹² Muhammad, ‘Abduh. *Al-Islam wa al-Radd ‘ala Muntaqidihi* (al-Qāhirah: Muṣṭafā Muḥammad, 1928), 31-40.

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸¹⁶ ‘Abduh. *Risāla* 135. *Theology of Unity*, 112.

⁸¹⁷ Amāra. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 1/22.

⁸¹⁸ ‘Abduh. *Risāla* 133. *Theology of Unity*, 111.

shared in the worship of idols (*aṣnām*). Nevertheless, he grew into a fine character – morally and rationally (*‘aqlan*).⁸¹⁹

The explicit language of *shirk* is absent in ‘Abduh’s account of prophecy and religious history. But the idea is clearly present. ‘Abduh describes idol worship in terms of *wathaniyya*, not *shirk*. In addition, this is tied to notions of irrationality and the lack of intellectual development. The religion of Islam, for ‘Abduh, is as much a religion of *tawḥīd* over *wathaniyya* as it is reason over irrationality. The two are intertwined, even inseparable.

Christianity, reason and *shirk*

‘Abduh’s engagement with Christianity reinforces the link between *shirk* and irrationality. It also points to a connection between *shirk*, irrationality and social and political decline. While the Qur’an discusses Christianity in many ways and distinguishes Christians as ‘people of the book’ from outright *mushrikūn*, it reserves sharp critique for some Christian doctrines (Q 4:17, 17:111, 19:34). On this basis, the Islamic tradition has understood Christian doctrine through the lens of *shirk*.⁸²⁰ Notions of the Trinity and Incarnation, however understood by Muslim thinkers, are widely seen to reflect Christian *shirk* and the religion’s later corruption (*tahrīf*) by its followers. As Jon Hoover notes, this view crosses doctrinal and sectarian lines.⁸²¹ Some of the largest refutations of Christian doctrine are seen in the works of the Shī‘ī Abū ‘Īsa al-Warraḡ, the Mu‘tazilī ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadḥānī (d. 1025) and the Ḥanbalī traditionalist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).⁸²² To cite from ‘Abd al-Jabbār:

They (Christians) believe in and worship three gods and lords...If they say, ‘We do not single out any one of these Gods for worship. Rather we worship all of them as one’, one should reply; ‘this does not get you out of having committed *shirk* in the matter...nor does this diminish what we have said about you. For by this thinking it would be correct if we worshipped as one a hundred thousand objects.’⁸²³

In ‘Abduh’s time, the encounter with Christianity was seen not through a doctrinal lens but as part of a much broader political and ideological Western incursion upon the Muslim world. Christianity was the religion of the colonial powers and the colonial backdrop is key to ‘Abduh’s engagement. This is clear from two famous episodes in his lifetime. In a series of articles written for the Egyptian press, since collected and published, ‘Abduh responded to the polemics against Islam made by the former French foreign minister, Gabriel Hanotaux (d. 1944), and the Arab Christian secular intellectual Farah Anṭūn (d. 1922).⁸²⁴ Both justified the ‘civilising mission’ of Western powers over the Muslim world and ascribed the decline of Muslims to Islamic teachings. Both contrasted a backward and despotic Islam that was hostile to science, reason and philosophy with a Christianity that encouraged the pursuit of

⁸¹⁹ ‘Abduh. *Risāla* 135. *Theology of Unity*, 112.

⁸²⁰ For the argument that the Qur’an in these verses is in fact rejecting Christian heresies, not orthodox Christian teachings of the Trinity, see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), 133-7.

⁸²¹ Jon Hoover. ‘Early and Medieval Muslim Attitudes towards Christian Doctrines’, in David Thomas, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Christian-Muslim Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018), 170-3.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 172-175.

⁸²³ ‘Abd al-Jabbār. *Critique of Christian Origins = Tathbūt Dalā’il al-Nubuwwa / ‘Abd al-Jabbār; A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, ed. and trans. G.S. Reynolds and S.K. Samir (UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2010), 30-32.

⁸²⁴ For these responses see ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/258-386 (to Anṭūn) and 3/215-250 (to Hanotaux).

learning. For Anṭūn, the historical Christian tolerance to science and learning paved the way for the development of modern European civilisation.⁸²⁵ For Hanotaux, the fusion of religion and politics in the East had made any progress impossible. Muslims, he writes, must separate religion from political affairs, as had happened in Europe.⁸²⁶ Neither Anṭūn or Hanotaux argue explicitly for the doctrinal truth of Christianity over Islam. This is implicit, however, in their attempts to prove the doctrinal harmony between Christianity and European progress and development. Like ‘Abduh, it appears that doctrinal truth was measured and manifest in the amenability to worldly progress.

An in-depth study of the arguments made by Anṭūn and Hanotaux, also ‘Abduh’s response to such, lies beyond the scope of this chapter.⁸²⁷ There is much overlap in ‘Abduh’s two responses, yet what is most notable is his general take on the essential difference between Islam and Christianity. This reverses the claims of his interlocutors. ‘Abduh presents a clear and consistent contrast between Islam as a religion of reason and Christianity as an irrational and superstitious faith. This is a central theme.

The most foundational basis for all Christians, and this is not contested by the Catholics, Orthodox or Protestants, is that belief is a gift (from God) to which reason (*al-‘aql*) does not pertain, and that religion (*al-dīn*) is something that contradicts the rulings of reason (*mā yunāqīḍ aḥkām al-‘aql*), meaning that whatever contradicts the dictates of reason, that is what one must believe. As Anselm said; ‘One must believe first...and then strive to understand what one believes’.⁸²⁸

‘Abduh describes the defining feature of Christianity as the belief in the irrational (*al-īmān bi ghayr al-ma‘qūl*).⁸²⁹ It is clear that he writes with the doctrine of the Trinity (*tathlīth*) in mind. Descriptions of the Trinity as “contradictory to the rulings of reason” (*mā yunāqīḍ aḥkām al-‘aql*) are found throughout the Islamic tradition.⁸³⁰ And elsewhere, ‘Abduh is more explicit:

Indeed, we have not heard of any Christian who truly believes and worships God as a man, despite their statements to this effect. Nor have we ever seen any Christian attempt to rationalise the doctrine of the Trinity (*la yu‘aqqil ‘aqīdat al-tathlīth*). Rather, they insist that this is a doctrine to which reason does not pertain.⁸³¹

‘Abduh also describes Christian doctrine in terms of *wathaniyya*.⁸³² The language of *shirk*, we may note, is absent in ‘Abduh’s engagement with Christianity. Instead, he stresses the irrational nature of Christian doctrines like the Trinity. It would seem that ‘Abduh draws heavily on the traditional Muslim

⁸²⁵ ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/258-386.

⁸²⁶ For the full text of Hanotaux’s argument, see Muḥammad ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya ma’ al-‘Ilm wa al-madaniyya*, ed. Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad ‘Amāra (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 2013), 19-66.

⁸²⁷ For a overview, see Kateman, *Shared Questions, Diverging Answers*, 149-92. Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 86-9. Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 95-7.

⁸²⁸ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 43.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 34. Christians, he writes, thus confuse ignorance with piety (*juhāla wa taqwa*). Ibid., 47.

⁸³⁰ This is a common refrain, for example, throughout Ibn Taymiyya’s *Al-Jawāb al-Sahīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīh*, ed. ‘Alī ibn Ḥassan ibn Nāṣir al-‘Alawī, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Ibrāhīm al-‘Askr and ‘Imrān ibn Muḥammad al-‘Imrān 3 volumes (Riyādh: Dār al-Faḍīla, n.d). (see for example 3/391.)

⁸³¹ ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/231.

⁸³² Ibid., 3/229-31.

critique of Christianity, then, but expresses this in a different way. In his critique of Christian doctrines like the Trinity, ‘Abduh closely connects, even synonymises, notions of *shirk* and irrationality in faith. ‘Abduh then ties the *shirk* or irrationality of Christian doctrine to a theme of decline and backwardness. He addresses the question of the doctrinal suitability of Islam and Christianity to worldly progress. ‘Abduh inverts the claims of his opponents and argues that Christianity, not Islam, has been a staunch opponent of learning, knowledge and progress throughout its history. Pointing to the history of Arab-Muslim scientific invention, ‘Abduh argues that Islam is in perfect accord with reason and science and that Christianity, by contrast, has proven across its history to be hostile to free thought and the spirit of scientific enquiry.⁸³³ ‘Abduh also accuses “earlier religious communities”, a reference to Christianity, of innovating the idea that religion and science are in tension with each other.⁸³⁴ Against Anṭūn, ‘Abduh argues it was not a supposed Christian tolerance for science and learning that led to progress in Europe. Rather, the long history of Church intolerance to science eventually led to the relegation of religion to the private sphere and to the secularisation of Europe:

Is it right to describe surrender to the victorious as ‘tolerance’? Is it right to equate powerlessness with lenience?...Is it not more truthful to explain the present harmony between religion and science (in Europe) a result of political tolerance for religion - not religious (Christian) tolerance for political power and science? Should we really call the triumph of science over Christianity...(religious) tolerance?”⁸³⁵

History also proves, ‘Abduh writes, that Christianity is far from a religion of tolerance.⁸³⁶ He notes with in a sarcastic tone that it would “take all year” to list the historical record of violence committed in the name of Christianity.⁸³⁷ Islam, in contrast, has not known the practice of forced conversion or the violence over issues of doctrine that were common to medieval Christianity:

Whoever heard of wars between the early *salaf* and the Ash‘arī’s despite their disagreement, or between *ahl al-sunna* and the Mu‘tazilī’s despite the great differences of their creeds. Moreover, we never heard of Muslim philosophers becoming a sect and entering into violent war...⁸³⁸

Examples that could prove otherwise, for ‘Abduh, like the Khārijite sect or the inquisition (*miḥna*) over doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an, were isolated cases and rooted in political, not doctrinal concerns.⁸³⁹ It is on this basis that ‘Abduh rejects Hanoteaux’s prescription of secularism as a condition for progress for the Islamic world, as noted earlier, pointing to the different historical experience of the Muslim world.⁸⁴⁰

The irrational nature of Christian doctrine, then, is clearly reflected in its historical record. ‘Abduh thus upturns notions of a despotic, anti-intellectual East and a tolerant Christian West that were common to

⁸³³ Ibid., 3/267, 286-93, 353-4; *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*. 28-29 and 40-2. Wielandt. ‘Main trends’, 721.

⁸³⁴ ‘Abduh., *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/365. Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 129-30.

⁸³⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/353-4. Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 129.

⁸³⁶ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*. 16-7, 30-32 and 68.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 22.; *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/267.

⁸³⁹ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 22. (“Yes, we know the *Khārijites*...but these wars were political and not doctrinally driven, they help views of divine sovereignty and their wars were not over creed, but their desire for political power.”)

⁸⁴⁰ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/249-50.

colonial-era discourse. But there is a tension here. ‘Abduh argues this against a civilizational reality that appears to favour Christian Europe over the Islamic world. ‘Abduh negotiates this in several ways. As has been shown, he ties the growth of Europe to Muslim sources.⁸⁴¹ Elsewhere, he refuses to ascribe the strength of Europe to Christian teachings and argues that Europe has progressed by turning its back on Christianity, not because of it:

There is no relation between the Christian religion and its present civilisation (in Europe). This is because the Gospel...orders a withdrawal from the world (*insilākh*) and asceticism in it... It teaches a full separation (*inqiṭā’*) from the world...It states clearly to ‘give to God what is God’s and to Caesar what is Caesar’s...Is this what we see in the civilisation based on this religion? European civilisation is the civilisation of Kings and Emperors, of gold and jewels... This has nothing to do with the Gospel!⁸⁴²

This is not to praise Christian virtues, but to deny the link of European strength with Christian doctrine. Indeed ‘Abduh criticises Christianity for its perceived emphasis on the Hereafter to the neglect of this world. Islam, he writes, corrects this by embracing both this world and the next.⁸⁴³ Elsewhere, ‘Abduh ties the rise of Europe to the Protestant Reformation. He praises Protestantism as a reformist (*iṣlāh*) movement that challenged blind *taqlīd* of the medieval Church and, in so doing, lifted Europe out of its backward state in the Middle Ages:

With such extremism (*al-ghulū*) in religion...darkness spread, knowledge vanished and the (use of) reason was forgotten, the pillars of social order were destroyed and corruption spread throughout all Christian countries, until that reform (*iṣlāh*) movement came to defeat all of this, and Europe set out on its well-known course. We have already explained this many times...⁸⁴⁴

As a movement that rejects clerical authority and calls to return to the original sources, ‘Abduh ties the strength of Europe to Protestantism to reinforce his own ideas of Islam and religious reform. Except for the prophecy of Muhammad and some ritual acts, he writes, Protestantism is “different from Islam in name, but not meaning.”⁸⁴⁵ But he is also critical. Figures like Luther and Calvin were violently hostile to science and their opponents, ‘Abduh notes, while Protestants did not challenge the irrational nature of Christian doctrine.⁸⁴⁶

The point in this chapter is not to measure the strength of these claims. It is to illustrate that ‘Abduh’s use of Christianity reinforces the two key aspects of his thought. The first is his connecting, even synonymising, notions of irrationality and *shirk*. ‘Abduh draws on the traditional Muslim critique of Christian doctrine but never expresses this in terms of *shirk*. The Trinity is condemned because it is irrational. It would seem that ‘Abduh engages the concept of *shirk*, but expresses this in a different way. His stress on the irrational nature of Christianity is a means by which ‘Abduh discourses the nature and meaning of *shirk*. From this, ‘Abduh’s use of Christianity also reflects his ‘functionalist’ approach to religion, the notion that religion is defined by its social and political ends. The irrational nature of

⁸⁴¹ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/240. Also 3/250, 443-6, 450, 453-6, 458-70.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*,/220-1.

⁸⁴³ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 32 and 75-6.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3/231.

⁸⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3/469-70

⁸⁴⁶ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/293-5. ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 48-9.

Christian doctrine has to be reflected, for ‘Abduh, in its historical record as an impediment to knowledge, learning and progress. ‘Abduh’s use of Christianity thus neatly reflects his broader conception of *shirk* as both irrational and a source of worldly decline.

On science, technology and *shirk*

In a second article, Hanotaux attributes the decline of the Muslim world to a perceived emphasis in Islam on the omnipotence and transcendence of God. The stress on the absolute power and will of God, he writes, renders human beings fatalistic and passive, deprived of free will and the capacity to change fate except through prayer. Christianity, by contrast, elevates human beings via free will and lessens the divide between humanity and God through the Incarnation. This, Hanotaux writes, explained the productivity and industriousness of Europe and the inertia and stagnation of the Muslim world:

The Christian conception (of God) is more comforting for mankind, and leads mankind to approach God through his acts because it does not cut the ties (between man and God). Yet the fierce God of Muḥammad allows his creatures to drift aimlessly in space, behind the stress on his transcendence, with no resource except prayer... (this is why) the word "Islam" means "surrender" to God's will.⁸⁴⁷

Again, the truth of a religion is manifest by its perceived doctrinal suitability to progress. This was a common view of Islam in Europe at the time. The philosopher Ernest Renan (d. 1892) offered much the same assessment.⁸⁴⁸ For this reason, and to counter the idea that Islam is an obstacle to progress, ‘Abduh addresses the issue of free will and predestination in several places.⁸⁴⁹ Conceding the reality of fatalism and apathy among Muslims, he argues this is because doctrines like predestination (*qadr*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*) have been misunderstood.⁸⁵⁰ For ‘Abduh, the correct understanding of divine decree or *qadr* does not deny human freedom, nor leave Muslims passive before an almighty God.⁸⁵¹ Invoking the classical Ash‘arī doctrine of *kasb* or ‘acquisition’, by which man ‘acquires’ his actions from God through his free will, ‘Abduh insists upon man’s free will and his accountability for his actions:

The Creator (of man) endowed him with free choice by which he can act independently, so what he acquired is his and what he acquired is upon him. (*fa-la-hu mā kasaba wa ‘alayhi mā iktasaba*).⁸⁵²

The man of sound mind knows in himself that he exists, needing no guide or teacher to prove this. It is the same for the actions of his will (*a ‘mālahu al-ikhtiyāriyya*). He weighs their consequences in his mind, measures them in his will, and acts upon them... To deny any of this would be to deny existence itself... (Yet) the believer also confesses that in all his acts of choice, rational or physical, he proceeds upon powers and capacities granted to him by God.⁸⁵³

⁸⁴⁷ Cited in Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 170., n.712. I would like to thank Sabrina LeSolleic for assistance with the translation from the original French.

⁸⁴⁸ See the 1893 lecture entitled “Islam and Science” in Ernest Renan, *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and other Studies* (London: Walter Scott, 1896), 84-108. ‘Abduh also cites Renan’s argument, to refute it. See ‘Abduh, *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 102-3.

⁸⁴⁹ ‘Abduh, *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 100. For a full overview see Kateman, *Shared Questions*, 175.

⁸⁵⁰ ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/225-6, 244-5, 507 and 5/131. These misunderstandings, he writes elsewhere, were “the deadly poison that killed the spirit of self-respect and zeal (*ghīra*)” among Muslims. See ‘Abduh, *al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 106.

⁸⁵¹ Sixty-four Qur’anic verses, he writes, state that God grants man freedom of choice: ‘Abduh, *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/222.

⁸⁵² *Ibid.*, 3/222.

⁸⁵³ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 59-60. *Theology of Unity*, 62-3.

‘Abduh refuses to speculate further on the question of free will versus predestination. This leads only to division, he writes, and the essence of *qadr* will remain a mystery.⁸⁵⁴ The aim is clearly to invoke the doctrine of *kasb* to refute the idea that Islam renders Muslims passive and fatalistic. In so doing, ‘Abduh also refutes a common idea of how Islam was a barrier to progress.

From this, ‘Abduh discusses the meaning and nature of *shirk*. In this passage the concept of *shirk* is not implicit, subtly embedded in a discourse on irrationality. Nor is it expressed in terms like *wathaniyya*. This is ‘Abduh’s most explicit and sustained reflection on *shirk*. The passage is worth citing in full:

Some claim that belief in man’s acquisition (*kasb*) of his actions leads to the sin of *shirk* with God – the supreme wrong. But such views have not taken into account the Qur’anic significance of *shirk* and its meaning in the *sunna*. It is the belief that something other than God has a superior causation to that which God, by His gift, has set in manifest causes (*al-‘itiqād an li-ghayr Allāh athran fawq mā wahhabahu Allāh min al-asbāb al-zāhira*) and that there is a greater force (*sulṭān*) than that which arises from the created order. It is the belief of those who exalt other than God to divine authority by presuming to dispense with the means He has given – seeking victory in war without the strength of military forces, for example, or healing from sickness without use of the medicines given by God, or happiness in this life and the next without the paths and laws (*sunna*) that God has ordained. To seek these and similar ends in neglect of the divine means is a form of the sin of *shirk*. It was this that characterised the pre-Islamic idolaters (*al-wathaniyyūn*) and thus the *sharī‘a* came to eradicate it.⁸⁵⁵

The depth and complexity of this passage is of note. It is also clear that this is not a traditional reflection on *kasb*. ‘Abduh draws on a classical term and concept but does so for modern ends, as seen in the reference to military forces and modern medicine.⁸⁵⁶ This may also explain the distinction in his works between *wathaniyya* and *shirk*. The former relates to the worship of tangible objects like idols or statues, perhaps, while ‘Abduh uses the latter to express this much broader, thematic meaning.

In a general sense, ‘Abduh argues that many of the features of the modern world, like modern medicine and weaponry, are gifts from God. These are the ‘means’ God has provided for health and military victory in this life. To seek these ends via other means, then, is a form of *shirk*. This rejects God’s dispensation for man and implies a faith in another superior force or causation. It is possible to read this as a kind of sanctification in ‘Abduh for the latest science and technology. On this basis his English translator Kenneth Cragg (d. 2012) offers a critique:

That to be remiss about military preparedness, or negligent of the medicines God has given, is a form of *shirk* is a fascinating window on Islam as an approach to existence...(But) taken seriously, it would seem to exclude the sort of ‘criticism’ of existing ‘givens’ which has been the cutting edge of scientific and technological development.⁸⁵⁷

‘Abduh’s adulation of science, warns Cragg, could impede future scientific progress by fostering too deferential an attitude to its latest findings. But there is no reason why this must be the case. Against

⁸⁵⁴ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/222 and 4/411. See Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 117.

⁸⁵⁵ ‘Abduh. *Risāla*, 61. *Theology of Unity*, 63-4. ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 4/412.

⁸⁵⁶ See Nasution, *The Place of Reason*, 174, n.23 (“‘Abduh’s use of the Ash‘arī term *kasb* is in fact confusing and misleading...(yet while) authors disagree about the real nature of ‘Abduh’s concept...they are one in understanding that his use of the term *kasb* does not come in the sense of the Ash‘arī idea of acquisition.”) For a similar conclusion see Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 105.

⁸⁵⁷ Cited in ‘Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, 23.

Cragg, it could be argued that ‘Abduh is not suggesting that scientific progress should not be made. More likely, he argues the opposite. Muslims must strive for this as this would equally be from God’s bounty for human beings. In a journal article on criticism (*al-intiqād*), for example, ‘Abduh insists that a continual striving for progress in knowledge is essential to society, with criticism a vital guarantor against social decline (*qahqarā*) and stagnation (*waqfa*).⁸⁵⁸ Failure to strive for progress in science and other fields would likely constitute *shirk*, for ‘Abduh, on the same grounds as that outlined above.

In a deeper and more specific sense, this reflection on *shirk* leads one to ‘Abduh’s idea of the *sunna* of God (*sunnan Allāh*). This is not explicitly referred to in this passage on *shirk* but it is only against this background that ‘Abduh’s passage fully makes sense. A central theme in his works, ‘Abduh describes the *sunnan Allāh* as the fixed, unalterable laws that govern the universe. They are the means by which created events occur and effects come into being. ‘Abduh writes:

The *sunan* are those well-established paths along which all things take their course and in accordance with which effects follows causes; they are what are also called *sharā’i*, *nawāmīs* and some people call them *qawānīn*. What difference does it make? The Qur’an uses a variety of expressions to declare that the order of human society, whatever happens in it, is of a single order, unaltered and unchanging, and that whoever seeks happiness...must then look to the sources of this order.⁸⁵⁹

Islam has shown that the great phenomena of the universe follow a custom which God has fixed in His eternal knowledge and which no accident can change.⁸⁶⁰

‘Abduh writes that the *sunnan Allāh* are “also known as the laws of nature” (*al-ma’rūfa bi-nawāmīs al-kawn*).⁸⁶¹ His *sunnan Allāh* are often equated with natural theology.⁸⁶² The key is that all aspects of existence, for ‘Abduh, follow a *sunna* created by God. Everything occurs according to a fixed rule that cannot change, he writes, and makes no exception even for Prophets.⁸⁶³ In this way ‘Abduh insists that the world is governed by divinely-willed regularity and causality, not instantaneity and chance. It is on this basis that he is sceptical of the existence of miracles (*khawāriq*). He writes:

Islam did not make any kind of miracles a part of the proofs of prophecy, upon them be peace, nor does it claim that those calling to the truth are able to change anything of the *sunnan Allāh*. This is so clear, so famously known, we have no need to further expand upon it.⁸⁶⁴

Muslims of all shades and sects are unanimous that there is no obligation to believe in any such miracles on the part of a saint since the rise of Islam. It is permissible for every Muslim, by communal consensus, to deny the occurrence of any miracle whatever by any saint, whoever he may be. Such a denial in no way contravenes the fundamentals of Islam.⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁵⁸ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 2/161-5.

⁸⁵⁹ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 61. See also Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 120.

⁸⁶⁰ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/473 and 477.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3/224.

⁸⁶² Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 140. Kerr, *Islamic Reform*, 131.

⁸⁶³ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 58. Also see Nasution. *The Place of Reason*, 180.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 58

⁸⁶⁵ ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 205-6. *Theology of Unity*, 158. Scepticism of miracles seems a recurring theme in modernist literature. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1896), a figure often linked to ‘Abduh, shares this. See J.M.S Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Leiden: Brill, 1949), 45.

‘Abduh thus offers marked scepticism on belief in the miracles of saints (*karamāt al-awliyā*), a key feature of traditional Sunni piety throughout history.⁸⁶⁶ Miracles, by definition, contradict the laws of nature (*khāriq al-‘āda*) and thus the *sunnah Allāh*. The miracle of the Qur’an is the sole exception.⁸⁶⁷ ‘Abduh criticises Christianity for its perceived dependence upon miracles (*khawāriq*). This, he writes, is the primary basis (*al-aṣl al-awwal*) of Christianity and reflects the irrational nature of its doctrines.⁸⁶⁸

Yet the *sunnan Allāh* does not refer only to the laws of nature. It also refers to what ‘Abduh sees as the fixed, intelligible laws of human social and political history. This is how it relates to his reflection on *shirk*. It is clear, for ‘Abduh, that medical health or military victory is only achieved by way of natural, intelligible forces, by following causes that arise from the created order. In his Qur’anic exegesis ‘Abduh outlines that there is a fixed *sunna* of God for achieving victory in war. Following this leads to victory, he writes, while deviating from it leads to destruction.

If God did not repel the people of falsehood and corruption with those of truth and reform (*ahl al-iṣlāh*), the people of falsehood and corruption would overcome the righteous (*al-ṣāliḥīn*) and conquer the lands, corrupting all the earth. So it is from the grace of God to all people of the worlds that he gives permission to those of his true religion to fight the unbelievers and corrupters... God will grant them victory so long as they strive for truth and reform (*al-iṣlāh*) in the land... This is one of the *sunnan* of God in relation to human social affairs (*sunna min sunnihi fī al-‘ijtimā ‘a al-bashrī*), that people of truth and falsehood will always fight and resist the other.⁸⁶⁹

Coupled with his reference to “the strength of military forces”, it would seem there is no other way to achieve this victory for ‘Abduh other than the pursuit of the latest weaponry. This is the *sunna* of God. To seek military victory via other means, then, becomes a form of *shirk*. This rejects the *sunnan Allāh* and implies there is higher form of causation, separate to that which God has constituted.

It is worth recalling that this reflection on *shirk* proceeds from a discussion on *kasb*, where ‘Abduh affirms man’s freedom to act and refutes the charge of compulsion and passivity. ‘Abduh’s aim, then, is to present an image of Islam that is rational and logical, amenable to modern science and technology, but that also empowers man to act, strive and determine his fate. Islam mandates the acquisition of the latest science and technology, ‘Abduh insists, and to seek worldly progress via other means is a form of *shirk*. But there is a tension here. It could be argued that ‘Abduh offers an overly rationalised theology that strives to accommodate the latest science and technology, but is removed from the piety of ordinary believers. ‘Abduh’s stress on the *sunnan Allāh* insists that God intervenes only through fixed laws that govern the universe, but many believers seek more than this - they seek the closeness and intervention

⁸⁶⁶ For attestations by recent scholars as to the Sunni consensus in the belief of the miracles of saints, see Maḥmūd Shaltūt. *Al-Fatāwa*, 12th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1403/1983), 52. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī. *Fiqh al-Sīra*, 4th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2008), 40-2. See also Muhammad Amanullah. ‘Debate over the Karāma of Allah’s friends’, *Arab Law Quarterly* 18:3 (2003); 365-74. Jonathan Brown. ‘Faithful Dissenters; Sunni Skepticism about the miracles of saints’, *Journal of Sufi Studies* 1 (2012); 123-169.

⁸⁶⁷ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 57. ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/426 and 500.

⁸⁶⁸ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 30-32.

⁸⁶⁹ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 1/710. See also Nasution. *The Place of Reason*, 180.

of God in their daily lives. ‘Abduh does not accommodate this. His comments for those who seek medical health through supplicating to God are a case in point:

The sick man who implores God to restore his health is in fact asking; ‘O God, Suspend for my sake your Laws which you say cannot be changed or modified!’⁸⁷⁰

If this passage on *shirk* depicts ‘Abduh in strongly rationalist and modernist terms, it may also reveal his divide from the hopes, fears and inclinations of the wider community.

This also captures the tie between Islam and worldly progress, *shirk* and worldly decline, in his thought. ‘Abduh’s uncritical embrace of modern science and technology is of note. There is no sense of any scepticism or hesitancy as ‘Abduh presents these as wholly good, part of God’s dispensation for man, with their acquisition mandated by His *sunna*. ‘Abduh predates the rise of nuclear weapons, mass pollution and environmental crises that came to define the twentieth century, and which may have led to a more critical engagement with modern science and technology.⁸⁷¹ Yet perhaps most revealing is the allusion to military preparedness and the acquisition of latest weaponry as part of the *sunna* of God. While ‘Abduh is often depicted as conciliatory towards British colonial rule in Egypt, there are clear passages in his works that reveal an urge to restore the military strength of the Muslim world so as to achieve independence from colonial rule.⁸⁷² Muslims, he writes, must learn the secrets of Western military development for their own self-defence and liberation:

The unbelievers must be fought with the same means they employ for fighting Islam. It is included in this, that one must rival them in our time in the manufacture of canons and rifles, or warships and airships, and other kinds of instruments of war. This all makes perfection in the technical and natural sciences obligatory for all Muslims only by this means can military preparedness be attained.⁸⁷³

This supports Nikki Keddie’s contention that ‘Abduh, like his mentor Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), was primarily concerned and amazed by the sheer military might of the West:

It is hard to escape the impression that what really appealed to him both in early Islam and in the modern West was political strength. His...attempts to prove that the Koran enjoins the acquisition of the most modern and effective armaments supports this idea.⁸⁷⁴

But the issue is not just political, as Keddie suggests. It is no less theological. The two are inverse and cannot be separated. Acquiring modern science, technology and weaponry is a key source of social and political strength and a means of achieving independence from colonial rule. But this is also a religious obligation for ‘Abduh, part of the *sunnan Allāh*. Conversely, seeking military victory without procuring the latest weaponry is a form of *shirk* for ‘Abduh, as has been shown, but it also guarantees military defeat. The same applies for seeking medical health without the latest medicine. ‘Abduh condemns this

⁸⁷⁰ Cited in Nasution. *The Place of Reason*, 181.

⁸⁷¹ This is not to suggest that there were no such critical voices in his time. It is remarkable to contrast ‘Abduh’s attitude in this regard that of his contemporary, the perennialist writer Rene Guenon (d.1951). See Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁸⁷² Ana Belen Soange. ‘Shura and Democracy; two sides of the same coin?’, *Religion Compass* 8/3 (2014); 97.

⁸⁷³ Adams, *Islamic Modernism*, 136.

⁸⁷⁴ Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism; Political and Religious Writings of Sayyed Jamal al-din “al-Afghani”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 41.

as *shirk* but it is also, clearly, a cause of illness. The link between Islam and worldly progress, *shirk* and socio-political decline is clear. The key is that Muslims had idolatrously turned their backs on the *sunnan Allāh*. The consequence of this was manifest in the colonised and backward state of the Muslim world.

On the cult of Muslim saints

In a general sense, this reflection on *shirk* in the *Risālat al-Tawhīd* seems to condemn a worldview or mentality, a ‘closed’ attitude that does not embrace the perceived benefits of modern science and technology. More specifically, the passage can be read to critique those seeking miraculous interventions in worldly life, those who believe that medical health or military victory can be achieved by any means other than the practical, rational acquisition of the latest forms of medicine and weaponry. One may therefore link this passage on *shirk* to ‘Abduh’s critique of the cult of saints. This is a central theme in his works. ‘Abduh is highly critical of the veneration of saints and shrines. Numerous passages in his works reflect this:

Shirk is of various types...including that which has come to affect the Muslim masses (*‘āmat al-muslimīn*) in their worship of other than God by way of bowing and prostration. And the greatest of these kinds of *shirk* is that by way of supplicating and seeking intercession (with God) by placing intermediaries between themselves and Him...And we certainly see this *shirk* among Muslims today.⁸⁷⁵

And you will not see any god added to this religion... except that (expressed by) the word “intercession” (*shafā’a*), which its practitioners reckon is a means of veneration the prophets and saints, but which is, in reality, a means of turning its them into idols, that disgrace the greatness of the Lord of the Worlds. The only explanation for this is in the whispers of Satan.⁸⁷⁶

This is “manifest *shirk*, not hidden”, writes ‘Abduh, and a heretical innovation (*bid’a*) that was unknown to the *salaf*.⁸⁷⁷ In his commentary on the Qur’an ‘Abduh reads criticism of the cult of saints into verses that seem unrelated to the issue. On the ‘throne verse’ (Q 2:226, *ayat al-kursī*), for example, ‘Abduh condemns the popular custom of seeking blessings (*tabarruk*) from the relics of saints:

The true God is the one who is worshipped deservedly...while gods who are worshipped undeservedly are indeed very many. To the extent that those who believe in the benefit (derived from) certain trees or inanimate objects, like Hanafī’s tree or Kalshānī’s sandal, they are to be considered worshippers of these objects in reality.⁸⁷⁸

These passages echo the criticism of the cult of saints in the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Muḥammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that ‘Abduh was called a “Wahhābī” in his time.⁸⁷⁹ His student, Rashīd Riḍā, faced the same charge and was forced to flee Ottoman Damascus on these grounds.⁸⁸⁰ Scholars have noted these parallels. Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), a

⁸⁷⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A’ māl al-Kāmila*, 2/230. For similar passages see Ibid., 1/37, 369, 371, 379-80, 718, 720-1, and 2/247, 291, 574.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., 1/721.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., 4/544-45.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid., 1/718.

⁸⁷⁹ See Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 106 and 130.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid., 110-2.

contemporary of ‘Abduh, speaks of the “cultural Wahhabism” (*kulturwahhabismus*) in ‘Abduh regarding the cult of saints.⁸⁸¹ Louis Massignon refers to ‘Abduh in a passage on the intellectual origins on the Wahhābī movement.⁸⁸² The notion that ‘Abduh is deeply indebted and influenced by Ibn Taymiyya continues in the works of Norman Calder, Frank Griffel and others.⁸⁸³

We should take this with caution. It is contested, for example, whether ‘Abduh ever engages the works of Ibn Taymiyya.⁸⁸⁴ Descriptions of ‘Abduh as “Wahhābī” reflect a polemical use of the term on the part of defenders of the cult of saints. ‘Abduh seldom mentions the Wahhābī movement in his works and criticises the perceived intolerance of the sect.⁸⁸⁵ But more deeply, it could be argued that the nature of ‘Abduh’s critique of saint veneration is distinct. The cult of saints is *shirk*, for ‘Abduh, because it is perceived as irrational, associating saints with a power or causation that is distinct from what God has set forth in his *sunnan*. Pleading for the miraculous intercession or intervention of saints runs directly counter to the scientific, rational emphasis on the *sunnan Allāh*. It is also, for this reason, a source of Muslim decline. We get a sense of this after a long passage in which ‘Abduh emphasises the Qur’anic enjoinder to seek answers through rational investigation and determined effort. He then writes:

The early Muslims (*salaf*) lived by these laws. While the Muslim spirit was exalted by these noble beliefs and worked them out in worthy actions, others suppose that by their prayers they can shake the earth and rend the heavens with their lamentations, while they wallowed in their passions and persisted in extravagant ways, so that their idle hopes of intercession (*shafā’a*) profited them nothing.⁸⁸⁶

‘Abduh condemns the cult of saints, then, for its perceived irrationality in age of science and reason and because he views it as a source of lethargy and passivity. In these passages one senses the frustration in ‘Abduh, even embarrassment, that as Europe colonised the Muslim world with the latest science, and technology, many Muslims sought the miraculous interventions of saints. ‘Abduh’s polemics against the cult of saints echo the works of earlier reformers, but this masks an entirely different, modernist concern. It again reveals the close link between *shirk*, irrationality and worldly decline in his thought.

A defence of images and statues in Islamic law

‘Abduh’s final engagement with *shirk* further reflects his stress on the rationality of Islam and the link to worldly progress. But this is in a different way. In this instance, ‘Abduh does not follow the views of earlier figures, as with the cult of saints, but rather overturns a medieval understanding of *shirk* on the grounds of it having become redundant in the modern age. We see this in an important, if largely overlooked, legal ruling (*fatwā*) by ‘Abduh on the permissibility of statues and images in Islamic law.

⁸⁸¹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 321.

⁸⁸² Griffel. ‘What do we mean by ‘salafi’?, 212, n.86.

⁸⁸³ Ibid., 210-12. Norman Calder. ‘The Limits of Islamic Orthodoxy’, in A. Rippin, ed. *Defining Islam: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007), 221.

⁸⁸⁴ A point noted in Haddad. “Abduh et ses lecteurs”, 28; “Relire Muhammad Abduh”, 61-62. It is noticeable that Griffel does not cite any primary sources when describing ‘Abduh as “heavily influenced” by Ibn Taymiyya. See Griffel. ‘What do we mean by ‘salafi’’, 210-12.

⁸⁸⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A’ māl al-Kāmila*, 3/233.

⁸⁸⁶ ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 178-9. *The Theology of Unity*, 138-9.

These have been traditionally proscribed in Islamic law on the basis of numerous hadith narrations. The prohibition focuses on issues of *shirk* or idolatry, the fear of worshipping the image in place of God or for intercession with God, also the idea that the image-maker (*al-muṣawwir*) haughtily attempts to replicate the creation of God. The prohibition is expressed by the Shāfi'ī jurist, al-Nawawī (d. 1284);

The authorities of our school and others hold that the making of picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and that it is one of the great sins, because it is specifically threatened with the grievous punishment mentioned in the Hadith... This is the summary position of our school on the question, and the absolute majority of the Companions of the Prophet and their immediate followers the succeeding generations accepted it.⁸⁸⁷

In a legal ruling entitled 'Statues and Images; their benefits and legal ruling' (*al-taṣwīr wa al-timthāl; fawā'iduha wa ḥukmuha*), 'Abduh overturns this proscription. He gives this ruling after a trip to Sicily in 1903, where 'Abduh favourably observes the European custom of preserving works of art and history for the sake of knowledge and for the benefit of future generations. He contrasts this with the perceived miserable state of affairs in Egypt:

We (Egyptians) do not take any interest in preserving anything so we can retain its benefits for those who have yet to come... the gift of preservation is not part of what we inherit. Instead, what is inherited are the gifts of malice and resentment, passed on from fathers to sons until their corrupt men and ruin countries.⁸⁸⁸

'Abduh then addresses the issue of *shirk* directly. He argues the hadith proscriptions against images and statues were revealed during the age of pre-Islamic idolatry (*al-wathaniyya*) and thus no longer apply. This is because the threat of images becoming objects of worship is absent in the modern age. Egyptians must instead collect, document and preserve statues and images for their educational value. 'Abduh insists that if one were to approach a scholar on this question, specifically;

regarding the hadith 'those people who will be most tortured on the day of Judgement are the fashioners' and other such things from the *Ṣaḥīḥ*, he will say to you that this came during the days of idolatry (*al-wathaniyya*). Images were taken up during this time for two reasons: the first was distraction and the second was to seek blessings from whichever righteous figure was depicted. The first reason religion detests and the second, Islam came to wipe out. The fashioner in both cases is a distraction from God and facilitator of *shirk*. (But) if these obstacles are removed and the benefit pursued, then... it seems to me that Islamic law is far from prohibiting one of the best tools for learning after it has been established that it is not a threat to religion.⁸⁸⁹

'Abduh thus discredits the threat of statues and images becoming a means to *shirk*. There may be several reasons for this. It may be the case that, in an age of colonialism, the issue of the permissibility of statues is no longer a chief concern. Or, it could be argued that 'Abduh, himself a product of the modern period, a time of print media and technology, fails to see any problem with images at all. Yet this did not affect

⁸⁸⁷ Sharaf al-Dīn Nawawī. *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Imām Muslim* (Cairo: Al-Maṭba'a al-kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1305/1887), 8/398. See Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam: A Study of the Piece of Pictorial Art in Muslim Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1928), 9-10. Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 49-50.

⁸⁸⁸ 'Abduh. *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, 3/203. For an overview see Dina Ramadan. 'One of the Best tools for Learning: re-thinking the role of 'Abduh's fatwa in Egyptian Art History', in Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Misona., ed. *A Companion to Modern African Art* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2013); 137-153.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3/201.

other scholars of the period. There is a wider political context that is perhaps important to this ruling. Some decades previous, in the 1870's the Egyptian Khedive Isma'īl (d. 1895) erected numerous public statues in Cairo as part of a raft of pro-European policies. Scholars from al-Azhar condemned the statues, likening them to the idols cleared from the *ka'ba* by the Prophet.⁸⁹⁰ 'Abduh would likely have been aware of this episode and uses his ruling, perhaps, as a further means of buttressing his 'modernist' credentials and of stressing the amenability of Islam to the modern age.⁸⁹¹

Art historians have lauded 'Abduh's ruling as an enlightened Muslim appreciation of the arts.⁸⁹² A close reading of the text, however, reveals no interest in art or aesthetics. 'Abduh's focus is strictly on statues and images as sources of knowledge and learning.⁸⁹³ In this vein, the ruling reinforces 'Abduh's stress on Islam as a rational faith that is no barrier to worldly success and progress. It would seem that once 'Abduh perceived the benefits of images and statues, as during his visit to Sicily, his 'functionalist' conception of Islam means that the faith cannot be an obstacle to a source of progress. This is clear in 'Abduh's brief comments on legal methodology. While standing against the weight of the classical legal tradition, 'Abduh's comments are terse:

I would say to you that the fashioner has fashioned (the image) and the benefit is unquestionable, undisputed. The idea of worship (*'ibāda*) or the exaltation (*ta'zīm*) of pictures and statues has clearly been wiped from people's minds...In general, it seems to me that Islamic law is far from prohibiting one of the best tools for learning after it has been established that it is not a threat to the religion."⁸⁹⁴

In this episode it is the medieval understanding of *shirk* that is an obstacle. The classical view of statues and images as a means to *shirk* had itself become irrational and a source of backwardness in his time. 'Abduh thus swiftly rejects a medieval reading of *shirk*. To maintain the classical ruling of an-Nawawī vis-à-vis images and statues in the current age, in light of their benefits for Muslims, did not support 'Abduh's insistence that Islam is a rational faith, nor his orientation towards worldly progress.

Conclusion

This chapter is not an exhaustive account of 'Abduh's life and thought. It suffices from the foregoing to draw out some general themes. In an era defined by Enlightenment notions of 'reason' and 'progress',

⁸⁹⁰ See Rudolph Peters. "The Lions of Qasr al-Nil Bridge: The Islamic Prohibition of Images as an issue in the 'Urabi Revolt', *Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and their Fatwas*, ed. Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Massick, David S. Powers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 217-220. Alexander Scholch, *Egypt for the Egyptians! The Socio-Political Crisis of Egypt in 1878-82* (London/Oxford: Ithaca Press, 1981), 282. Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 93.

⁸⁹¹ Even Rashīd Riḍā' reinstates the prohibition on images in his treatise on the Caliphate; Rashīd Riḍā. *Al-Khilāfa* (Al-Qāhira: al-Zahrā' li-l-ālam al-'Arabī, 1988), 93. ("there is no benefit on advantage in erecting statues"). Riḍā stresses that statues are prohibited as a means to idolatry (*al-wathaniyya*) and argues that erecting statues is a custom that has been imported from the West and that those arguing for its practice perform "*taqlīd* of the polytheists and Christians" (p. 95).

⁸⁹² Egyptian art historian Samīr Gharīb has "no doubt that this fatwa (of 'Abduh) played an important role in supporting the fine arts and artists and in and encouraging research in the arts." Samīr Gharīb, *Fī Tārīkh al-Funūn al-Jamīla* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1998), 68. 'Abduh is described as a "connoisseur of the arts, a lover of artistic creativity" in Muḥammad 'Amāra. *Al-Islām wa al-Funūn al-Jamīla* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1991), 136. See Ramadan. 'One of the Best tools for Learning', 138.

⁸⁹³ Ramadan. 'One of the Best tools for Learning', 148. ("Even while 'Abduh is praising both (images and statues) forms of expression, he is flattening them into a means of documentation, emptied of any kind of aesthetic worth, measured in terms of accuracy and ability to capture "truth" there is certainly no celebration of creativity or aesthetic pleasure.")

⁸⁹⁴ 'Amāra. *Al-A'māl al-Kāmila*, 3/202.

‘Abduh insists Islam is inherently rational and progressive. The crux of the matter, for ‘Abduh, is that Islam is not against many of the changes of the modern world, nor are these a threat to faith. Properly conceived, Islam is compatible and even mandates these changes. Yet ‘Abduh offers a distinct Islamic conception of ‘modernity’, one in which reason works in the service of faith, not in opposition to it, and Islam is not an obstacle to worldly progress, but the source of it. ‘Abduh thus challenges European discourses of reason and a secular definition of religion as a purely private matter. This underlines his responses to Anṭūn and Hanoteaux, who justify the ‘civilising mission’ of Europe and call for secular rule in the Arab world. ‘Abduh embraces much of what we call ‘modernity’, then, but he also reconfigures it. And if his treatment on *shirk* appears scattered, expressed in different terms and across a range of contexts, from the nature of idolatry to Christian doctrine, from the acquisition of modern science and technology to a critique of the cult of saints and defence of statues and images, what ties this together is a view of *shirk* as both irrational and a source of worldly decline. This is the common underpinning. This is, of course, an inversion of ‘Abduh’s conception of Islam as a rational and progressive religion. In line with a ‘functionalist’ reading of religion, where Islam is defined above all by its worldly benefits, it seems that the punishment for *shirk* is not left until the hereafter. Rather, it is seen in the here and now.

His attempt to straddle Islamic and European traditions leads to a historiographic tension in scholarship, with ‘Abduh variously termed a modernist, *salafī*, Mu‘tazilī, even Wahhābī. Yet his works raise other difficulties. ‘Abduh avoids exploring his most consequential ideas in depth. His stress on the place of reason in faith is never fully explored. His treatment on *shirk* leaves a range of questions that are never addressed. It is not clear, for example, why his reflection of *shirk* in relation to Christian doctrine is only implicit, couched behind a discourse of irrationality, but explicit in relation to the cult of saints. The reflection on *shirk* in the *Risālat al-Tawhīd* appears briefly and only implicitly engages his notion of *sunnan Allāh*. Nor is the relation between *shirk* and *taqlīd* addressed in ‘Abduh’s thought. As seen earlier, polemics against the legal custom of *taqlīd* are an important theme in ‘Abduh. He writes:

How far those who believe in *taqlīd* are from the guidance of the Qu’ran!...Islam forbids us to use *taqlīd*... If we continue to follow this way of *taqlīd*, there will be no one who holds to the religion. But if we return to the use of reason to which God directs us...there is hope we can revive the religion.⁸⁹⁵

There seems clear overlap of *shirk* and *taqlīd*. ‘Abduh condemns both for the failure to use reason, with both seen as sources of decline. ‘Abduh even expresses his critique of *taqlīd* in terms deeply resonant of the idea of *shirk*, describing *taqlīd* as “worship of scholars” (*ibādat al-‘ulamā*).⁸⁹⁶ Jurists, he adds, take their legal texts over the Qur’an as the “foundation of the religion” (*asās al-dīn*).⁸⁹⁷ Perhaps ‘Abduh imagines *taqlīd* to be a kind of *shirk*, a way of ‘associating’ jurists with the tenants of revelation. But he never makes this clear. This leads to what is perhaps the key tension in his works. ‘Abduh defends

⁸⁹⁵ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 3/395. Adams, *Islamic Modernism*, 130. Haj, *Reconfiguring*, 79.

⁸⁹⁶ ‘Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 96.

⁸⁹⁷ ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila*, 4/211.

the rational and progressive nature of Islam, it seems, only by distancing this from much of Islamic history and practice. We see this across this chapter. His scepticism of miracles goes against a key feature of traditional Muslim piety.⁸⁹⁸ ‘Abduh criticizes Christianity for positing miracles as proof of faith. But as critics like Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī (d. 1954) noted, the Islamic tradition also views miracles as a proof of Muhammad’s prophecy.⁸⁹⁹ His stress on *sunnan Allāh*, as seen, suggests a disconnect from the life of ordinary believers. A common theme is to defend the rational nature of Islam against the beliefs and practices of many Muslims:

What is called ‘Islam’ is not really Islam. It is only the preservation of some ritual actions like prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage, or the retention of certain expression... Everything that is defective today among Muslims is not from Islam, rather it is from something else that has been called ‘Islam.’⁹⁰⁰

This ultimately means that ‘Abduh calls to a rational and progressive Islam that, by his own admission, did not exist. It existed only in his vision of ‘true’ Islam, one that stood in stark contrast to what Islam had become in his time. ‘Abduh defends Islam, then, by severing it from the beliefs and practices of Muslims and key aspects of Islamic history. Only in this way can he carve a place for Islam in an age of colonial modernity.

⁸⁹⁸ See Abduh. *Al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyya*, 58. ‘Abduh, *Risāla*, 205-6. *Theology of Unity*, 158

⁸⁹⁹ Muṣṭafa Ṣabrī. *Mawqif al-‘Aql wa al-‘Ilm wa al-‘Ālam min Rabb al-‘Ālamīn wa-‘Ibādihī al-Mursalīn* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1981), 1/99.

⁹⁰⁰ ‘Abduh *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila.*, 3/341.

Chapter VI: *Shirk* and the Political Sphere: Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966)

Islam must govern. (*lā budd li al-islām an yaḥkum*).⁹⁰¹

To give people sovereignty over people is to deify them. (*tahkīm al-nās fī umūr al-nās ta'lih lahum*)⁹⁰²

Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) is among the most controversial thinkers of twentieth century Islamic thought. A major figure of recent Egyptian and Islamic history, Quṭb is widely known as an “Islamic fundamentalist theorist” given his influence upon a range of radical movements in the second half of the twentieth century.⁹⁰³ The leaders of Al Qaeda, among other groups, have described Quṭb as an inspiration.⁹⁰⁴ For this reason Quṭb has attracted considerable attention in the West in recent years. His biographer John Calvert notes:

In the aftermath of the 9/11 atrocity, commentators scrambled to piece together Al Qaeda’s ideological genealogy...Generally, in these studies, Quṭb stands at the fore of the genealogical trail. A consensus has emerged that the ‘road to 9/11’ traces back to him...One cannot deny Quṭb’s contribution to the contemporary tide of global jihad.⁹⁰⁵

Yet the importance of Quṭb for scholars of Islamic studies and for modern Muslim discourses is not limited to his link with groups like Al Qaeda.⁹⁰⁶ Quṭb’s influence lies in his status as an early ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood revivalist movement (*ikhwān al-muslimīn*), his writing in a turbulent period of Egyptian and Arab post-colonial history, his execution in 1966 at the hands of the Egyptian regime and, lastly, his producing a dramatic and highly engaging prison exegesis of the Qur’an. Written in several drafts between 1954 and 1966, this is Quṭb’s *magnum opus* and considered one of the most influential, widely read and translated Qur’anic commentaries of recent times.⁹⁰⁷

⁹⁰¹ Sayyid, Quṭb. *Ma‘ārakat al-Islām wa al-Ra‘smāliyya*, 7th edition (Cairo; 1980), 55. C.f. J.G. Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 54.

⁹⁰² Sayyid, Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl al-Qur‘ān*, 6 vols (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004), 2/1110. C.f. Olivier Carré, *Mysticism and Politics: A Critical Reading of Fī Zilāl al-Qur‘ān by Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966)*, trans. Carol Artigues and revised by W. Shepard (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 174.

⁹⁰³ Roxanne L. Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory: An Islamic Critique of Rationalism’, *The Journal of Politics* 59:1 (1997), 28.

⁹⁰⁴ Montasser al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: the story of Bin Laden’s Right-Hand Man*, trans. Ahmed Fekry, ed. Sara Nimis (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 24-5. The original Arabic title is; *Aymān al-Zawāhirī: Kamā ‘Araḥu* (Cairo: Dār al-Mahrūsa, 2004).

⁹⁰⁵ John Calvert, *Sayyid Quṭb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), 6-7. Giles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Malise Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* (London & New York, Granta Books, 2006). François Burgat, *Islamism in the Shadow of Al-Qaeda* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

⁹⁰⁶ For his importance pre-9/11: Kenneth Cragg, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur‘an* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 53. (“Sayyid Quṭb, on every score of biography and books, demands to be included in any company representing pen and faith in recent Islam.”) Sayyid, Quṭb. *Social Justice in Islam*, trans John B. Hardie, revised and intro. Hamid Algar (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1993), 1. (“Sayyid Quṭb...is still the most influential ideologue of the Islamic movement in the contemporary Arab world.”)

⁹⁰⁷ Jansen exaggerates however in claiming Quṭb’s Quran commentary “may actually be the most widely translated and distributed Islamic book of all time.” See Jansen, *Dual Nature*, 51. See also Jonathan Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet’s Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014), 124. (“Quṭb scrawled ruminations on the Qur’an that would one day be published as the most widely read commentary on the Qur’an in the Arab world.”)

We have a wealth of biographical literature on Quṭb.⁹⁰⁸ Quṭb was born in 1906 and was for most of his life an essayist, poet and literary critic.⁹⁰⁹ Only in the 1940's did he turn to write on Islamic themes. This was in response to wider events in the region; the Second World War and the coming independence of Egypt after British colonial rule, also the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.⁹¹⁰ A two-year study visit to the United States sharpened this turn and Quṭb joined the Muslim Brotherhood (hereon: MB) upon his return. Quickly emerging as a leading ideologue of the MB after the assassination of its founder, Ḥassan al-Bannā (d. 1949), Quṭb and other MB members were imprisoned by the regime of Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir in 1954 on conspiracy charges. Quṭb spent most of the rest of his life in prison. It is widely-known that his experiences in prison, the isolation and torture he received, had a dramatic effect upon Quṭb's thought.⁹¹¹ From the vantage point of prison, Quṭb wrote his most famous and controversial works, including his Qur'an commentary, entitled *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (*Fī Zilāl al-Qur'an*: hereon *Fī Zilāl*), and his prison manifesto, *Milestones* (*Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*; hereon *Ma'ālim*).⁹¹² Both works call in effect for an Islamic revolution to overthrow the secular, Egyptian regime. Quṭb was executed by the al-Nāṣir regime, ostensibly due to the ideas contained in these works, in 1966.⁹¹³ He has since been lauded as a martyr for later generations of followers.⁹¹⁴

An outline of Quṭb's thought

This chapter examines Quṭb's thought in its final, most developed form. Drawing primarily on the final edition of his prison commentary and *Ma'ālim*, this chapter engages Quṭb's ideas in the last two years of his life, from 1964-66. Quṭb's very writing style in these works mark a break with the conventions of classical scholarship. His sentences are brief. The frequent use of exclamation marks gives his works a dramatic, urgent tone. The flow and cadence of his prose reveals his literary background while the emphasis throughout is on moral exhortation rather than sober, scholarly analysis.⁹¹⁵ One senses the prison environment in these works and a dominant theme in *Fī Zilāl* is Quṭb's deep aural and aesthetic appreciation of the Qur'an. Quṭb writes of the "atmosphere" (*jaww*) of the Qur'an and notes the distinct

⁹⁰⁸ See Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 23-197. Adnan A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism* (London: Praeger, 2005). Sayed Khatib, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The theory of jahiliyya* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 44-58. Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 1-21. Albert J. Bergesen, ed., *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion and Society* (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), 1-33. The most authoritative Arabic biographies are Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Fatāḥ al-Khālīdī. *Sayyid Qutb; min al-Milād ilā al-istishhād* (Dimaqsh; Dār al-Qalam, 2010). This is an expanded version of his *Sayyid Qutb: al-Shahīd al-Ḥayy* ('Ammān: Maktabat al-Aqṣa, 1985). 'Adīl Ḥamūda. *Sayyid Qutb: min al-Qarya ilā al-Misnaqa: tahqīq wāthā'iqī*, 3rd edition (Cairo: Sina li-l-Nashr, 1990).

⁹⁰⁹ A full compilation of Quṭb's poetic works written in this period has been published. Sayyid, Quṭb. *Al-A'māl al-Sha'riyya al-Kāmila*, ed. 'Alī 'Abd al-Rahmān al-'Atīyya (al-Qāhira: Markaz al-Ahrām lī al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 2012).

⁹¹⁰ Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 103-139.

⁹¹¹ Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 137-67. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 197-229.

⁹¹² For English translation see Sayyid Quṭb. *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, trans. Adil Salahi and Ashur Shamis (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2003). Sayyid, Quṭb. *Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*, ed. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Fatāḥ al-Khālīdī ('Ammān: Dār 'Ammār lī al-Nashr wa al-tawzī', 1433/2012). For English translations see Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service Ltd, 2002).

⁹¹³ The most detailed account of Quṭb's trial and execution is found in al-Khālīdī. *Sayyid Qutb; min al-Milād*, 441-483.

⁹¹⁴ Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 265-271. Idem, 'Wayward Son: The Muslim Brothers' Reception of Sayyid Qutb' in Edwin Baker and Roel Meijer, ed. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 249-250.

⁹¹⁵ As noted in J. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 79.

“personality” (*shakhsiyya*) of each chapter, even likening its effect to musical rhythm (*īqā’ mūsīqī*).⁹¹⁶ Quṭb insists the Qur’an should be internalized as a lived experience, not engaged as a text for scholarly analysis:

Living in the atmosphere of the Qur’an does not mean studying the Qur’an, reciting it, becoming familiar with Qur’anic scholarship... Rather, what we mean by living in the atmosphere of the Qur’an is for man to live in an atmosphere, in circumstances, in a movement, even in suffering and a struggle... like those within which this Qur’an was revealed.⁹¹⁷

It is known that Quṭb’s ideas changed in prison but it is worth noting how Quṭb conceives of this change. Quṭb describes his transformation in deeply spiritual, even mystical, terms, depicting his prison years as a time in which some of the hidden truths and mysteries of the Qur’an were revealed to him. The sense is of a kind of spiritual awakening. His introduction to *Fī Zilāl* reads:

Life in the shade of the Qur’an is a blessing. A blessing that only he who has tasted it (*man dhāqahā*) knows. A blessing that lifts, blesses and purifies the age... Praise be to God... Who has blessed me with this life spent in the shade of the Qur’an... in which I have tasted (*dhuqtu*) such from His blessing that I had never tasted before in my life... I have lived to hear God – Praise be to Him – speaking to me, a humble and insignificant slave, through this Qur’an...⁹¹⁸

Quṭb draws heavily on the language of taste (*dhawq*), a term highly resonant in Sufi tradition. In Sufi literature the notion of *dhawq* has special significance and conveys a sense of direct experience or awareness of God, encountered through spiritual wayfaring and divine disclosure rather than books or doctrine. This use of *dhawq* plays a central role in the famous conversion to Sufism of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), for example, and recurs throughout his spiritual tome, the *Ihyā*.⁹¹⁹ This is in line with Quṭb’s use of the term and means that Quṭb’s prison works are never without a deeply mystical element. His Arabic biographer Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Fatāḥ al-Khālīdī captures this and speaks of the spiritual signs (*al-ishārāt*) disclosed to Quṭb in prison.⁹²⁰

Quṭb’s prison writings are rooted in his conception of *tawḥīd*. This doctrine has a clear political and legislative dimension for Quṭb and this underpins his prison writings. The core doctrine of the oneness of God, Quṭb repeatedly stresses, cannot be limited to personal belief or ritual acts. It must underpin the social and political system. The real meaning of ‘no god but God’ for Quṭb is that there is no sovereign or authority other than God. Quṭb’s conception of *tawḥīd*, then, involves the rejection of all humanly-constructed forms of governance:

Islam is not just a number of beliefs that our minds accept, nor a host of rituals and acts of worship, nor a worldly system (*nizām*) that is separated from faith and worship. It is a program that combines all these

⁹¹⁶ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 1/27-9. See also Issa J. Boullatta. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Literary Appreciation of the Qur’an’ in Issa J. Boullatta, ed. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’an* (London: Curzon, 2000); 354-71.

⁹¹⁷ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 3/1016-7.

⁹¹⁸ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, I/13. *In the Shade*, I/8.

⁹¹⁹ Eric Ormsby, *Al-Ghazali: The Revival of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 104-5. (“In his Sufi writings, Ghazali uses “taste” as a coded metaphor for experience: the deepest is perceptible only through experience; trust must be tasted to be known.”)

⁹²⁰ Al-Khālīdī. *Sayyid Quṭb; min al-Mīlād*, 369.

aspects and unites them together on the basis of belief in *tawhīd* and in deriving all systems and legislation from Him alone. There can be no division between accepting *tawhīd* and implementing the sovereignty of God.⁹²¹

There is no faith (*īmān*) in the person who objects to an order of God, whether on a big or small matter in the affairs of his life...or who depends upon human sources, other than God, to govern his economic, social and political life.⁹²²

Quṭb describes the declaration of ‘no god but God’ as a “revolt (*al-khurūj ‘alā*) against all forms of human authority.”⁹²³ This means that the central theme in *Fī Zilāl* and *Ma‘ālim* is the call to govern exclusively by Islamic law or *sharī‘a*. From prison, Quṭb proposes an Islamic alternative to the dominant political systems and ideologies of the West, such as capitalism, communism and nationalism. It is axiomatic for Quṭb that our experiments with Western systems and ideologies had failed. Islam, he insists, offered a ready alternative to assume the leadership of humankind. In a dramatic opening to *Ma‘ālim*, Quṭb writes:

Mankind today stands on the brink of a precipice! Not because of the danger of complete destruction that hangs over its head – this being just a symptom and not the real disease – but because humanity is devoid of those values necessary for healthy development and real progress... it is essential for mankind to have new leadership!⁹²⁴

As a mid-twentieth century Muslim thinker, Quṭb writes in a post-colonial environment where Western political and cultural influence is pervasive. His prison works are set against the backdrop of the height of the Cold War, with the demise of Fascism still in vivid memory. This prevailing political context is key. From the 1950’s Quṭb speaks of the rival blocs or “camps” (*mu‘askarāt*) of capitalism, communism and Islam.⁹²⁵ He stresses what he terms the comprehensiveness (*shamāliyya*) of Islam.⁹²⁶ The religion of Islam, he writes, offers an independent (*mustaqal*) and complete (*mutakāmil*) system that is entirely distinct and not dependent upon any Western system or ideology.⁹²⁷ Yet the influence of these rival systems was not of course limited to the West. It extended to the Muslim world. In Egypt, the al-Nāṣir regime of Quṭb’s time was a major advocate of the movement of pan-Arab nationalism (*al-qawmiyya al-‘arabiyya*), taking Egypt in a socialist and secular direction after the overthrow of British colonial rule in 1952.

⁹²¹ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/658-9. In *the Shade*, 3/144-5.

⁹²² Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 1/343.

⁹²³ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1005. See also Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 42-3. *Milestones*, 24-5.

⁹²⁴ Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 19-20. *Milestones*, 7.

⁹²⁵ Sayyid, Quṭb. *Al-‘Adāla al-Ijtīmā‘iyya fī al-Islām* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1413/1993), 190, 214 and 216. Sayyid, Quṭb. *Dirāsāt Islāmiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1402/1982), 172. Jan Peter Hartung, *A System of Life: Mawḍū‘ī and the Ideologisation of Islam* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 202.

⁹²⁶ Sayyid, Quṭb. *Khaṣā‘iṣ al-taṣawwūr al-Islāmī wa Muqāwimātuhu* (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1962), 17. For a translation see Sayyid Quṭb. *Basic Principles of the Islamic Worldview*, trans. Rami David (New Jersey: Islamic Publications International, 2006), 91-119.

⁹²⁷ Quṭb. *Al-‘Adāla al-Ijtīmā‘iyya*, 91-2 and 97. This is stressed in the opening chapter of Quṭb. *Khaṣā‘iṣ al-taṣawwūr*, 2-30. *Basic Principles*, 19-41. See also William E. Shepard. ‘Islamic and a ‘System’ in the Later Writings of Sayyid Quṭb’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 25:1 (1989), 37. (“he insists that Islam is not to be identified with, or interpreted in terms of, Western ideologies such as democracy and socialism.”)

The political theorist Roxanne Euben offers a perceptive reading of Quṭb that is central to this chapter. Euben presents Quṭb as essentially a critic of secular, Enlightenment rationalism. The insistence upon implementing divine law or *sharī‘a* that defines Quṭb’s prison works is, for Euben, an attempt to challenge modern notions of political sovereignty and governance that have, since the Enlightenment, excluded religious authority and transcendent truth from the political sphere, seeking instead to govern society solely on the basis of rationalist discourse. Euben writes:

Virtually all of what we have come to call “modern” forms of authority are premised upon the right of human beings – either through a leader or representative or directly – to rule the public sphere ... Quṭb (thus) engages not just institutional and historical reality of secularism, but the epistemology and worldview upon which it is founded ... (that is) the claim that knowledge is ascertainable through human reason, and that a theory of legitimate authority must be premised upon the right of humans to govern without the necessity of divine intervention.⁹²⁸

This is the crux of the issue for Quṭb. As early as his 1954 work *al-Mustaqbal li-Hadhā al-Dīn* (The Future of this Religion), Quṭb heavily engages European and Enlightenment history and condemns the Western separation of religious from political authority. Quṭb calls this a “hideous schizophrenia” (*al-faṣām al-nakd*).⁹²⁹ He writes:

It is not in the nature of a religion that it be separated from worldly life, nor for the divine system to be confined to personal feelings, ethical rules and ritualistic worship. Nor is it in the nature of a religion to be kept restricted to one corner of human life and be called a ‘personal affair’. No revealed religion can isolate just one small section of human life for God.⁹³⁰

In *Ma‘ālim* he finds the roots of this rupture in the Protestant reformation. Challenging Church corruption, Quṭb writes, led Europe to reject the idea of divine authority itself.⁹³¹ Quṭb condemns what he calls the ‘western concept of religion’ (*al-taṣawwur al-gharbī li ṭabi‘at al-dīn*), which relates only to belief in heart (*al-‘aqīda fī al-ḍamīr*) and does not insist upon taking control of the social and political sphere.⁹³² He stresses throughout *Fī Zilāl* that the very purpose of the Qur’an was not just to reveal the doctrine of the oneness of God, but to “establish a practical system” (*inshā‘ al-niḏām*) based on that doctrine.⁹³³

Quṭb is of course not the first or only Muslim thinker to critique Western secularism and this is a common trope in twentieth century revivalist writings.⁹³⁴ Euben’s analysis, however, situates and points to the essence of Quṭb’s thought. Firstly, it becomes clear that Quṭb’s prison works are not only directed at his secular and socialist Egyptian regime, nor Western systems, but more deeply at “rationalist

⁹²⁸ Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 51. Much of this article is derivative of her much larger work which explores this relationship in further detail; *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism – a work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁹²⁹ Quṭb, *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, 34-61.

⁹³⁰ Ibid, 34. Also Quṭb. *Khaṣā‘iṣ al-taṣawwur*, 45. *Basic Principles*, 62-63.

⁹³¹ Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 115. *Milestones*, 76.

⁹³² Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 115. *Milestones*, 76.

⁹³³ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1005.

⁹³⁴ See for example the chapter entitled ‘The Spirit of the West’ in Muḥammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads*, 3rd edition (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan Publishers, 2014), 33-66.

discourse itself.”⁹³⁵ Quṭb challenges the epistemological basis of Enlightenment secularism. This also challenges the common image of Quṭb in scholarship as an “anti-modern” thinker.⁹³⁶ Following Euben, Quṭb appears not anti-modern as such, but against the particular Enlightenment conception of ‘modernity’ and what this entails of the exclusion of divine authority from the political realm.⁹³⁷ This critique is, in fact, as old as the Enlightenment itself; it echoes the counter-Enlightenment tradition of Herder (d. 1803), de Maistre (d. 1812) and others that challenged the notions of human reason championed in the Enlightenment.⁹³⁸ As if to show this, Quṭb praises the technological and scientific advances of the modern West and argues for their adoption in the Muslim world.⁹³⁹ This is, again, a common theme in modern Muslim discourse, rooted in a basic and perhaps problematic assumption that Western material and scientific knowledge can be neatly excised from the secular environment from which it came.⁹⁴⁰ Yet Quṭb is aware of the danger of drawing on Western sources and urges caution, lest the adoption of Western science lead Muslims to imbibe something of the secular spirit:

If we rely on Western ways of thought, even in teaching the Islamic sciences, it will be an unforgiveable blindness on our part. Indeed it is incumbent on us, while learning scientific and technological sciences for which we have no other but Western sources, to remain on guard...a slight influence from them can poison the clear spring of Islam.⁹⁴¹

This passage gives an insight into Quṭb’s binary distinction between the secular West and Islam. But it also reveals his awareness of the present weakness of Muslims. The decline of Muslims in the fields of science and technology, coupled with the Western expertise in these areas, means that even in his final works Quṭb is unable to countenance a complete break with Western sources and knowledge.

The doctrine of *jāhiliyya*

A common theme in Quṭb’s prison works is to avoid discussing some of the most complex and controversial areas of Islamic theology and law. We find little interest in *Fī Zilāl*, for example, with issues like the relation of reason and revelation, the interpretation of the divine attributes or the question of free-will or predestination.⁹⁴² Quṭb’s focus is not on classical dogmatics, then, but in expounding the implications of his reading of *tawḥīd* for the social and political spheres. In this context the doctrine of

⁹³⁵ Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 51.

⁹³⁶ A point made throughout Emanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

⁹³⁷ Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 51.

⁹³⁸ On the ‘counter-Enlightenment’, see Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current; Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

⁹³⁹ Quṭb. *Ma’ālim*, 20-22, 168, 189. *Milestones*, 8-10, 96, 112, 116. Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 40.

⁹⁴⁰ Sayyed Nossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London & New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987), 18-9. (“Current ‘fundamentalist’ movements...accept some of the basic aspects of modernism. This is seen in their complete and open-armed acceptance of modern science and technology...(but they forget) completely that the nature and character of Islamic science are entirely different from those of modern science...they try to adopt modern Western technology, from computers to technology, without any thought for the consequences of all these inventions upon the mind and soul of Muslims.”)

⁹⁴¹ Quṭb. *Ma’ālim*, 179. *Milestones*, 116.

⁹⁴² Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 73. (“*Zilāl* is traditional and Ash’arite in its dogmatic contents...while being as little philosophical or traditional (*kalām*) as possible.”) Badmas Lanre Yusuf, *Sayyid Quṭb: A Study of his Tafṣīr* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), 202-261.

jāhiliyya is a defining feature of Quṭb’s prison works. He has been called the “exponent of *jāhiliyya par excellence*.”⁹⁴³ Derived from the root *j-h-l*, which has connotations of ignorance, the term *jāhiliyya* is usually translated as the ‘Age of Ignorance’. It is commonly understood to refer to the period of pre-Islamic Arabia. In the pre-Islamic sources and the Qur’an, however, where the term appears four times, the term seems to have a range of meanings and often denotes a sense of barbarism or extreme behavior.⁹⁴⁴ Thus the Qur’an speaks of the zealotry (*hamiyyat*) of *jāhiliyya*:

When those who disbelieved had put into their hearts zealotry - the zealotry of the time of ignorance (*hamiyyat al-jāhiliyya*). But Allah sent down His tranquillity (*sakīnatihi*) upon His Messenger and upon the believers and imposed upon them the word of righteousness, and they were more deserving of it and worth of it. And God is all-Knowing of all things. (48:26)

Izutsu describes the Qur’anic use of *jāhiliyya* as referring to “the peculiar attitude of hostility and aggressiveness against the monotheist belief of Islam.”⁹⁴⁵ Yet other verses do seem to allude to a historical epoch, as when the Qur’an speaks of the “first *jāhiliyya*” in verse 33:33.⁹⁴⁶ This becomes its dominant sense in the hadith traditions. The Prophet is reported to use the term in a historical sense in al-Bukhārī. For example, we read: “the Quraysh used to fast ‘*Āshūra* in the *jāhiliyya*” and “the best people in the *jāhiliyya* are the best people in Islam.”⁹⁴⁷ Quṭb draws on the common historical sense of the term, but then recasts it. He excises the term from a specific era and asserts *jāhiliyya* as a state of being, an essential condition, that is possible in any time or place. This state arises whenever the laws of God are suspended on earth:

Jāhiliyya – as God describes it and as His Qur’an defines it – is the rule of humans over humans because it involves making some humans servants to others, rebelling against God... *Jāhiliyya* is not a period of time but a condition, a condition which exists today, and will exist tomorrow... People – in any time and place – are either governed by God’s *sharī’a* – entirely, without reservations – accepting and submitting to it, in which case they are following God’s religion, or they are governed by a *sharī’a* invented by humans... in which case they are in *jāhiliyya*... Whoever does not desire the rule (*ḥukm*) of God desires the rule of *jāhiliyya*, and whoever rejects the *sharī’a* of God accepts the *sharī’a* of *jāhiliyya* and lives in *jāhiliyya*.⁹⁴⁸

Extracting *jāhiliyya* from a specific, pre-Islamic period is not entirely innovative. The Wahhābī chronicler Ibn Ghannām (d. 1811) describes the Arabian peninsula of his day as *jāhilī* given the spread of ostensibly idolatrous practices.⁹⁴⁹ Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) condemns the perceived ignorance of Muslims of his time in similar terms.⁹⁵⁰ It would seem Quṭb first encounters this particular use of

⁹⁴³ Giles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) 46. Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 123. Also see William Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 521-545. Sayyed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Quṭb; The Theory of Jāhiliyya* (London: Routledge, 2005); ‘Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyyah in the Thought of Sayyid Quṭb’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 38:3 (2002): 145-170.

⁹⁴⁴ This is noted by Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* 1 (Halle, 1889-90), trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967). Toshiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1996), 33-5.

⁹⁴⁵ Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious*, 35.

⁹⁴⁶ Q 33:33 (“And abide in your houses and do not display yourselves as was the display of the first *jāhiliyya*.”)

⁹⁴⁷ Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 522.

⁹⁴⁸ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/156. In *the Shade*, 6/17. Compare translation with Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 524.

⁹⁴⁹ Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 523.

⁹⁵⁰ Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 523.

jāhiliyya, relating to the absence of *sharī'a*, in Arabic translations of the Indian revivalist, Abū 'Ala Mawdūdī (d.1979).⁹⁵¹ The idea of *jāhiliyya* does not originate with Quṭb, then, though it is a major feature of his works and the doctrine for which he is most famous.

For Quṭb, then, the state of *jāhiliyya* is rooted in an absence of *sharī'a*. It arises from the secular separation of religious from political authority. By 1964 in *Ma'ālim* Quṭb no longer speaks of different camps (*mu'askarāt*) or systems but of a stark, Manichean divide between Islam and *jāhiliyya*. There are only two kinds of society, he insists, the Islamic or the *jāhili*.⁹⁵²

The *jāhili* society is any society other than the Muslim society. More specifically, we can say that any society is a *jāhili* society if it does not submit itself to submission to God alone, in its beliefs, ideas, worship, and legislation. According to this definition, all the societies existing in the world today are *jāhili*!⁹⁵³

Quṭb warns readers not to be fooled by the outward differences between capitalism and communism.⁹⁵⁴ The shared rejection of the *sharī'a* means that all these societies, for Quṭb, fall under the single category of *jāhili*.⁹⁵⁵ Quṭb also distinguishes this from what he calls the earlier, more simple forms of *jāhiliyya*. While *jāhiliyya* was previously rooted in a basic ignorance of God, Quṭb explains, it was now more assertive, actively prescribing laws in defiance of the law of God and assuming a concrete, organized form in society.⁹⁵⁶ Most crucially, the scope of modern *jāhiliyya* was not limited to the West. It extended to modern Muslim societies. Quṭb is aware that no Muslim society of his time governed exclusively by the mandates of the *sharī'a*. Some Muslim societies, he adds, even openly declare their secularism.⁹⁵⁷ The Muslim world, then, was no less a manifestation of *jāhiliyya*:

All the so-called Muslim societies today are (in reality) *jāhili* societies. We classify them among *jāhili* societies not because they believe in other gods alongside God...but because their way of life is not based on submission to God alone.⁹⁵⁸

We can say that the Muslim community has been extinct for some centuries...the term 'Muslim community' is the name for a group of people whose manners, ideas, concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from an Islamic source. The Muslim community with these characteristics vanished the moment the laws of God were suspended on Earth!⁹⁵⁹

For Quṭb, then, there is no real difference between the Islamic world of his time and the West. The absence of divine law or *sharī'a* meant all modern society was *jāhili* and that the Islamic world, properly

⁹⁵¹ Ibid, 524. Hartung, *A System of Life*, 200-5.

⁹⁵² Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 87-8 and 123-4. *Milestones*, 57-8 and 81.

⁹⁵³ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 126. *Milestones*, 80. See also *Ma'ālim*, 132. *Milestones*, 93.

⁹⁵⁴ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 87-88. *Milestones*, 57-8.

⁹⁵⁵ He does elsewhere specify Marxism as the worst. Quṭb, *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, 65. ("(Marxism is) more contradictory to human nature, in whole and in part, than any other system...Marxism is completely ignorant of the human soul...not to mention...ignorant of the nature of existence and the interpretation of life and the universe.") See also Sayyid Quṭb, *This Religion of Islam: hadhā al-dīn* (Riyadh, KSA: International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations, 1994), 24-5.

⁹⁵⁶ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 72. *Milestones*, 46.

⁹⁵⁷ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 128. *Milestones*, 83. Kemal Ataturk of Turkey is explicitly mentioned and condemned in this regard in Quṭb, *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, 7.

⁹⁵⁸ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 126-7. *Milestones*, 82.

⁹⁵⁹ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 38. *Milestones*, 9.

speaking, had ceased to exist. This final point, we may note, is a break with Mawdūdī.⁹⁶⁰ While Quṭb first encounters the idea of *jāhiliyya* in the works of Mawdūdī, he takes the implications of this doctrine much further.

Quṭb reaches this stark appraisal of the Muslim world only in his final years, from 1964.⁹⁶¹ We can perhaps read this as a culmination of his prison experience; subject to years of torture as a political prisoner in an ostensibly Muslim country, Quṭb concludes, perhaps, that the forces behind this injustice and the society that either supports or is indifferent to it could not be truly Islamic. But this also leads Quṭb to deeper reflection on the nature of *jāhiliyya*. While rooted in the absence of *sharī'a*, it was not confined to the sphere of politics or legislation. Rather, it covered all facets of life, extending to the realm of values, concepts, philosophy, traditions and ethics. Quṭb thus condemns “*jāhili* ways of thinking” (*manāhij al-tafkīr al-jāhili*) and even writes in *Ma'ālim* that *jāhiliyya* has “robbed us of our minds.”⁹⁶² Quṭb writes:

We are surrounded by *jāhiliyya* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, or perhaps more unjust (*aẓlam*). Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and arts, rules and laws, is *jāhiliyya*. Even what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought are also constructs of *jāhiliyya*! This is why true Islamic values never enter our hearts, our minds are never illuminated by Islamic concepts, and why no group arises among us like those of the first generation of Islam.⁹⁶³

All facets of society, then, even our conceptions of Islam, are the products of *jāhiliyya*. Quṭb thus presents *jāhiliyya* as an all-pervasive, multi-dimensional phenomena and, in this light, we can perhaps read the *jāhiliyya* doctrine as a metaphor for secular, Enlightenment modernity. It captures the essence of Quṭb's Enlightenment critique. Rooted in an absence of divine law, Quṭb perceives the influence of secular concepts, culture and values as having so penetrated the Muslim world that even what were considered Islamic were, in fact, *jāhili* constructs. For Quṭb, the age of secular modernity was essentially an age of *jāhiliyya*. It was not an age of enlightened progress, but a regression to a godless state of zealotry, barbarism and ignorance.

The sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) of God

The doctrine of *tawḥīd*, then, is not realized without implementing the *sharī'a*. The society that fails to govern in line with the mandates of the *sharī'a* is *jāhili* and cannot be considered Islamic. This, in turn, leads Quṭb to a second major doctrine. This is the idea of sovereignty or *ḥākimiyya*. Quṭb insists in *Fī Zilāl* and *Ma'ālim* that sovereignty is an attribute of God, often describing this as the primary attribute

⁹⁶⁰ Shepard. ‘Sayyid Quṭb’s Doctrine of “Jāhiliyya”’, 523

⁹⁶¹ Ibid., 524.

⁹⁶² Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1005. Also Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 67. *Milestones*, 41.

⁹⁶³ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 36-7. *Milestones*, 20.

of God (*al-ḥākimiyya awwal khaṣā'is li-llāh*) and pairing it with 'legislation' (*al-ḥākimiyya wa al-tashrī'i*).⁹⁶⁴ He writes:

Jāhiliyya is based on a rebellion against the sovereignty of God (*ḥākimiyya*) on earth. It transfers to man one of the primary attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others....
Jāhiliyya...takes the form of claiming the right to legislate rules of collective behavior...without regard to what God has prescribed.⁹⁶⁵

William Shepard summarizes Quṭb's position: "*Jāhiliyya* is the *ḥākimiyya* of man; Islam is the *ḥākimiyya* of God."⁹⁶⁶ Yet the term *ḥākimiyya* is a neologism. It is not found in the Qur'an or classical tradition. Again, Quṭb encounters this in Arabic translations of Mawḍūdī.⁹⁶⁷ The term is widely associated with Quṭb and Mawḍūdī even though the idea of the sovereignty of God was a central theme in Indian Muslim discourse of the early twentieth century, where Mawḍūdī likely encounters the term, with it meaning different things in different contexts.⁹⁶⁸ The term derives from the Qur'anic root *ḥ-k-m*, derivations of which are found in over two hundred and fifty verses with connotations of judgement and authority. In three verses the Qur'an states; "judgment belongs only to God" (*lā ḥukm illā li-llāh*, 12:40, 67; 6:57). These verses are crucial to Quṭb's thought but it is worth noting, briefly, that medieval exegetes display considerably less interest. Focusing on Q12:40, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) understands this to mean simply that God alone should be worshipped.⁹⁶⁹ Al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) briefly comments that God is creator of everything.⁹⁷⁰ Others use this passage to argue a broader theological point.⁹⁷¹ Thus al-Rāzī (d. 1209) argues on this basis against the idea of free will and stresses God determines all without man's agency.⁹⁷² In general, this verse fails to generate much discussion among the classical exegetes.

By contrast, Quṭb's discussion on 12:40 in *Fī Zilāl* marks a break with the classical exegetes. His comments on this verse reflect all the key hallmarks of his thought, capturing his insistence on the importance of *sharī'a* and the exclusive sovereignty of God. Quṭb writes:

(This verse means) judgment (*al-ḥukm*) belongs to God alone due to His divinity. Sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) is among the major attributes of divinity. Whoever claims sovereignty – whether an individual, a class, party, institution, community or humanity at large in the form of international

⁹⁶⁴ See for example Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl* 1/286. *Muqāwwimāt*, 84. *This Religion of Islam*, 16.

⁹⁶⁵ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 25. *Milestones*, 11.

⁹⁶⁶ Shepard. 'Sayyid Quṭb's Doctrine of "Jāhiliyya"', 528.

⁹⁶⁷ See Hartung, *A System of Life*, 205-209.

⁹⁶⁸ Muhammad Qasim Zaman. 'The Sovereignty of God in Modern Islamic Thought', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25:3 (2015); 389-418, esp. 403. ("The idea of the sovereignty of God was very much in the air in late colonial India, and...could mean quite different things in different quarters.")

⁹⁶⁹ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, al-Ṭabarī. *Jamī' al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1954), 12/220. C.f., Zaman. 'The Sovereignty of God', 391.

⁹⁷⁰ Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Umār Al-Qurṭubī. *Al-Jamī' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, 20 volumes (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1967), 9/192. C.f., Zaman. 'The Sovereignty of God', 391.

⁹⁷¹ This is a central purpose of exegesis itself See Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam; Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10-13. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 38-60. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran*, 97. ("As far as the (commentary) discussion does not consist of edifying generalities, it often only makes the pretense of being concerned with the Koran and its proper interpretation. Often the true subject of the debate is the degree to which Western influence...life should be tolerated".)

⁹⁷² Fakhr al-Dīn, al-Rāzī. *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-Mushtahar bi Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa Maḥāṭh al-Ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr: Maktab al-Tawthīq wa-al-Dirāsāt, 2005), 18/175. C.f., Zaman. 'The Sovereignty of God', 391.

organisations – challenges this primary attribute of divinity...God alone is the source of authority...Even humanity does not have the right to sovereignty...people have only the right to implement what God has laid down with His authority.⁹⁷³

The contrast between Quṭb and classical exegetes, in substance and emphasis, is clear. Quṭb is concerned not with a classical theology of free-will over predeterminism, but with questions of legitimate authority and governance. Divine sovereignty is clearly conceived on political and legislative terms. While al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī comment briefly that God is the source of everything, Quṭb interprets 12:40 to reject all man-made systems of governance; human sovereignty is, by definition, illegitimate. Equally evident is the mid-twentieth century political environment in which Quṭb writes. He reads a rejection of the authority of class, party and even international organizations, alluding to initiatives like the Geneva Convention, into the Qur'an.

Implementing the *sharī'a* is thus central for what it means to be Muslim, to live in an Islamic society and to believe in the oneness of God. Quṭb writes that the purpose of Qur'anic revelation was to found an *umma*, order a society and establish a State (*dawla*).⁹⁷⁴ But this raises the question of what a society that submits to the sovereignty of God looks like for Quṭb. On this, he is notably silent. Quṭb insists upon the *sharī'a* as an alternative to Western systems, then, but is not clear what this means in practice and refuses to lay this out in explicit terms.⁹⁷⁵ It is clear that this is not a call for the restoration of the historical Caliphate (*al-khilāfa*): Quṭb hardly mentions this in his works.⁹⁷⁶ Nor does he engage the rich field of *fiqh* or jurisprudence. The *fiqh* literature attest to a rich tradition of diversity and disagreement (*ikhtilāf*) among jurists over the exact meanings and ordinances of the *sharī'a*, yet these debates are absent in Quṭb. There is much ambiguity, moreover, over the role of religious scholars ('*ulamā'*) and jurists (*fuqahā'*) in his vision. These groups are seldom mentioned in his works and the impression, reading Quṭb, is that he envisions the sovereignty of God to be implemented free of any human mediation or interference. But this overlooks, of course, the traditional role of the jurists to be the guardians and interpreters of God's law.

This refusal to lay out a clear vision of Muslim society is not a curious lacuna but a considered choice. It is grounded in what Quṭb calls the "nature of the Qur'anic method" (*ṭabi'at al-manhaj al-Qur'ānī*).⁹⁷⁷ Quṭb reads a lack of theory and planning into the very essence of Islam. His argument proceeds in two stages. First, Quṭb writes that for thirteen formative years in Mecca the Qur'an revealed only the doctrine ('*aqīda*) of no god but God. It did not give details of the society to be built on that creed:

⁹⁷³ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 4/1990. *In the Shade*, 10/76-77.

⁹⁷⁴ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān*, 1/825. Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 163.

⁹⁷⁵ Shepard. 'Islam as a 'system'', 38-9. ("An objection that must occur to anyone who reads Quṭb's later works...(is that) while he is very insistent that Islam is a comprehensive method/program that can provide answers to all issues, he is very reticent to spell out what these answers may be.") Euben. 'Comparative Political Theory', 46-47. ("Quṭb's refusal to provide a blueprint for the institutions of an Islamic state...(reflects) the anti-theoretical tone pervading Signposts (*Ma'ālim*).")

⁹⁷⁶ This is a break with previous twentieth century Muslim figures like Rashīd Riḍā' (d.1935). Rashīd, Riḍā'. *Al-Khilāfa* (Qāhira: Al-Zahrā' li al-'ilām al-Arabī, 1988).

⁹⁷⁷ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 40-71. *Milestones*, 23-45.

Those who call to God's religion and want to establish the way of life prescribed by this religion should ponder at length over the significant fact that, for thirteen years, the Qur'an exclusively expounded (the issue of) doctrine (*al-'aqīda*) and did not deviate from this to describe the details of the system (*tafṣīlāt al-niẓām*) that would be established on this faith, nor any of the laws for the organization of the Muslim society.⁹⁷⁸

The only aim of the Meccan period, writes Quṭb, was to “instill belief in hearts and minds.”⁹⁷⁹ Secondly, Quṭb notes that the Qur'anic verses giving rules and laws for society were revealed only *after* the establishment of the Muslim community in Medina.⁹⁸⁰ This proves that Islam, he writes, is a “practical program” (*manhaj 'amālī*) concerned with “actual situations” (*ḥālāt wāqa'iyya*), not theoretical abstractions (*wa lā nazariyya*).⁹⁸¹ Quṭb thus argues that the laws, details and technicalities of a Muslim society should be addressed only as and when these issues arise - in other words, only *after* the establishment of a true Muslim community;

It is first necessary that a Muslim community come into existence which believes there is no god but God, commits itself to obey none but God, denying all other authority, and which challenges any law not based on this belief. Only when such a society comes into being, faces various practical problems and needs a system of law, does Islam initiate the constitution of law and injunctions, rules and regulations. It addresses only those who have in principle already submitted themselves to its authority.⁹⁸²

In this way Quṭb rejects outright the need to lay out his vision. This goes against the practical nature of the faith. In a notable passage in *Ma'ālim* Quṭb scorns the very notion of theory and planning and sees in this an insidious ploy to distract and delay the Islamic state:

The *jāhiliyya* which surrounds us...raises a very delicate question. It asks; ‘what are the details of the system (*niẓām*) you are calling to? How much research have you done? How many studies have you prepared and how many subjects have you written about? Have you constituted its jurisprudence (*fiqh*) on new principles? As if nothing were lacking for the implementation of *sharī'a* except research in *fiqh* and its details, as if everyone had agreed upon the sovereignty of God and were willing to submit to His laws!... This is a vulgar joke on Islam, and any person whom respects Islam should raise themselves above it... By these tactics, *jāhiliyya* looks for an excuse to reject the divine system.⁹⁸³

Discourse on jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the details of an Islamic society are a “waste of time”, Quṭb writes, akin to “building castles in the air”.⁹⁸⁴ Perhaps sensitive to a counter-charge, Quṭb insists he is not against *fiqh* as such; he embraces what he calls “dynamic *fiqh*” (*fiqh ḥarakī*), over the “*fiqh* of papers” (*fiqh al-awrāq*), the latter referring to the intellectual speculation he seeks to avoid.⁹⁸⁵ We should not, he adds, conceal God's religion in books.⁹⁸⁶

It is tempting to see in this a sensitivity in Quṭb over the complexities of *fiqh*, an awareness that abstract and technical discourse on jurisprudence will not usher in the sovereignty of God. It will only prolong

⁹⁷⁸ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 42. *Milestones*, 24.

⁹⁷⁹ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 51. *Milestones*, 31.

⁹⁸⁰ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 55-7. *Milestones*, 33-5.

⁹⁸¹ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 54. *Milestones*, 33.

⁹⁸² Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 54-5. *Milestones*, 33.

⁹⁸³ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 68. *Milestones*, 42.

⁹⁸⁴ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 69. *Milestones*, 43.

⁹⁸⁵ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, 2006. For more on the idea of *fiqh ḥarakī* see Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 184-188.

⁹⁸⁶ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 31. *Milestones*, 18.

the *jāhiliyya*. But there is of course a key difference between the ‘Qur’anic method’ in Medina and Quṭb’s own time. Unlike the first generation of Muslims, Quṭb does not live in an age of revelation. His is not an age in which new Qur’anic verses are revealed to respond to practical situations as and when they arise. The age of revelation has ended and the sources from which a Muslim society will be built, presumably the Qur’an, *sunna* and *fiqh* tradition, are readily available. Quṭb’s allusion to the Qur’anic method in Medina thus does not obtain and it would seem that he reads his own anti-theoretical ethos into the sources. The paradox, then, is that Quṭb calls to a Muslim society that he ultimately refuses to define. The call to govern exclusively by the *sharī‘a* is the dominant theme across Quṭb’s prison writings, but he never defines what he means by the *sharī‘a*, nor develops a vision of alternative Muslim society. The *sharī‘a* remains a vague, if evocative, category in his works. Islam, he insists, is a practical religion that demands action first.

On the nature of modern *shirk*

The clearest way that Quṭb expresses his vision of *tawhīd* is by condemning its opposite. This leads us to the place and function of *shirk* in his thought. While a true Muslim society that submits solely to the *sharī‘a* remains an ideal for Quṭb, he is able in contrast to point to what he considers the many manifestations of *shirk* in his time. At the outset, it is a challenge to separate notions of *shirk* from *jāhiliyya* in Quṭb. He does not explicitly distinguish the two and often describes *jāhiliyya* in terms highly resonant of *shirk*. In *Ma‘ālim*, for example, Quṭb describes deviation (*inḥirāf*) from the worship of one God.⁹⁸⁷ Only on closer reading do we find a subtle difference. While *jāhiliyya* denotes a general, underlying condition of ignorance, it would seem *shirk* conveys a more active, specific form of ‘association’ with God that arises from this state. Put simply, it is symptomatic of *jāhiliyya* that people engage in *shirk*. Quṭb writes:

Jahiliyya is not a specific of time, nor a particular stage, but a complete regression (*inḥisār*) of understanding the true meaning of divinity (*al-ulūhiyya*)... This regression leads people to commit *shirk* while reckoning that they follow the religion of God, as is the state in all the countries of the world.⁹⁸⁸

We therefore understand *jāhiliyya* and *shirk* as two categories that significantly overlap in Quṭb, but are not complete synonyms. The crucial connection is between *shirk* and *ḥākimiyya*. For Quṭb, anything less than exclusive submission to the *sharī‘a* constitutes *shirk* for it associates a core attribute of God, namely His sovereignty or *ḥākimiyya*, with other than Him. This is the essence of *shirk* for Quṭb.⁹⁸⁹ It is to grant sovereignty to other than God and Quṭb describes this as no less an act of *shirk* than prostration before an idol or image;

⁹⁸⁷ Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 196. *Milestones*, 129.

⁹⁸⁸ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 1763-4.

⁹⁸⁹ We should note that Quṭb briefly contrasts in *Ma‘ālim* the *shirk* by way of “belief” (*al-‘itiqād*) and that of “sovereignty” (*ḥākimiyya*). The former seems a reference to Islamic critiques of Christian doctrine. It is clear, however, that his main concern and engagement with *shirk* across his corpus concerns its connection with notions of sovereignty. Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 71. *Milestones*, 45.

Islam considers this *shirk*; it considers that giving people the power to pass judgment and govern in human affairs is to deify them, to make them rivals to God, and Gods forbids this just as He forbids prostration to images and idols. Both are the same in Islamic usage. Both are *shirk*.⁹⁹⁰

In reality, the term *mushrikūn* applies to those who not only associate images and idols with God...but who give people (not God) the right to legislate for society and individuals, prescribing customs and ruling... in line with human, not divine, customs and opinions.⁹⁹¹

Quṭb writes there is no difference between a belief in multiple gods and ascribing sovereignty to other than God: both are *shirk*.⁹⁹² It does not matter, he adds, if those granted sovereign are called gods or not; the reality of *shirk* is the same.⁹⁹³ Quṭb reads this into the Qur’anic verse that condemns Christians for taking scholars and rabbis as lords (*arbāb*) besides God (9:31). Christians did not really worship scholars or believe them to be gods, he explains, but accorded them power to legislate and govern their affairs over God.⁹⁹⁴ The doctrine of *shirk*, then, is as equally tied as *tawḥīd* to notions of governance, legislation and sovereignty. All rival political systems and ideologies become tangible manifestations of *shirk* in that they usurp the divine attribute of sovereignty.

Throughout *Fī Zilāl* Quṭb dismisses what he terms the ‘naïve’ (*sādhij*) conceptions of *shirk* that relate to images of wooden and stone idols from the pre-Islamic period. The idols of the present age, he writes, are manifest in the ‘idols’ of capitalism, communism, nationalism, secularism. Each of these systems, these ‘isms’, usurp God’s *ḥākimiyya* and submit Muslims to man-made legislation. We find clear allusions to these systems across his commentary:

We see in our times various types or aspects of *shirk*, by people who otherwise claim to believe in God’s oneness...Today, people glorify certain gods which they may call ‘the folk’ (*al-qawm*) or ‘the nation’ (*al-watan*) or ‘the people’ (*al-sha‘ab*), or a host of other names. These are no more than unshaped idols similar to the naïve (*sādhija*) idols that the pre-Islamic idolaters had ... People today acknowledge their Lord, but they abandon His commandments and His laws while they consider the orders and requirements of their own gods as sacred. For the sake of these gods, the commandments and laws of God are disregarded ... We deceive ourselves when we restrict pre-Islamic idolatry (*al-wathaniyya*) to the naïve form of idols and statues...As for the essential nature of *shirk*, this remains the same beneath all of its different forms and shapes. We must not lose sight of this fact!⁹⁹⁵

Elsewhere, in a discussion on Abraham’s destruction of idols in the Qur’an, Quṭb writes:

The worship of idols that Abraham prayed to God to spare him and his offspring from does not take only the naïve form practiced by pre-Islamic idolaters and other communities...To limit the concept of *shirk* to this naïve form stops us from seeing other forms which affect humanity...we need to have a fuller understanding of the nature of *shirk*, its relevance to idols, and the nature of idols... (this is that) when banners or slogans are raised in any community which gives rulers or priests power to put in place laws, values, standards and practices at variance with what is acceptable to God, these are in effect gods like the idols of old. We see today that nationalism (*qaymiyya*), patriotism (*waṭaniyya*) or a certain class in society as a whole are made like banners or slogans venerated in place of God...whenever *sharī‘a* comes into conflict with the service of such banners and slogans, then God’s law is set aside and the

⁹⁹⁰ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*. 2/1110. *In the Shade*, 5/172. Also Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 295.

⁹⁹¹ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*. 3/1413. *In the Shade*, 6/299.

⁹⁹² Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 81. *Milestones*, 45.

⁹⁹³ Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 114. *Milestones*, 75.

⁹⁹⁴ Quṭb, *This Religion of Islam*, 17.

⁹⁹⁵ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 3/1413. *In the Shade*, 6/299.

requirements of these banners are met...this is indeed a form of idol worship, because an idol need not be made of wood and stone. It can be represented in a doctrine or a slogan.⁹⁹⁶

Modern *shirk* is manifest in the ideologies and political systems of the age. More deeply, the essential nature of this *shirk* is the rejection of divine authority in the political sphere - it is the secular insistence upon the right of human beings to govern and legislate in place of religious authority. Quṭb knows he presents a fresh reading of *shirk*, hence the need to move beyond the 'naïve' conceptions of pre-Islamic idolatry. This is also far removed from a traditional discourse on *shirk* that relates to saints, shrines and debate over intercession.⁹⁹⁷ Quṭb offers a dynamic and highly politicized reading of Qur'anic *shirk* in which the political systems of the mid-twentieth century are brought heavily to bear on the Qur'an. The scope of Quṭb's reading seems both local and universal. References to 'the people' (*al-sha'ab*) point to Western-style democracy. References to the nation (*al-waṭan*) or nationalism (*al-waṭaniyya*) probably have closer connotations: this is a thinly disguised reference to the trend of Arab nationalism popular in Quṭb's Egypt.⁹⁹⁸

Echoing the distinction between modern and earlier forms of *jāhiliyya*, it appears the nature of modern *shirk* is different, even more insidious, to that found in the past. In places one detects a sense of nostalgia in Quṭb for earlier, pre-Islamic forms of *shirk*. Quṭb notes almost wistfully how pre-Islamic idols were simple structures made of wood and stone, rooted in a basic ignorance of God. This, he writes, is less dangerous than the modern *shirk* of capitalism, communism and nationalism. These new idols are more aggressive and assertive, actively prescribing values, worldviews and laws:

God – praise be to Him – issues a clear commandment that human beings should observe chastity and dress modestly. But the 'nation' or 'productivity' require women to go out revealing their beauty, to work as hostesses in hotels quite like the geisha girls in idolatrous Japan! So which gods orders are they following? ... God – praise be to Him – commands that doctrine ('*aqīda*) should be the basis of society. But 'patriotism' or 'the nationalism' orders that doctrine be disregarded and that nationality or race become the basis of society! ... God – praise be to Him – orders that His *sharī'a* is Sovereign, but a single slave, or a group of people, say; "No! Slaves are those whom legislate, and their *sharī'a* is Sovereign!" So which god is being followed?⁹⁹⁹

If pre-Islamic idols of wood and stone were a 'naïve' form of *shirk*, modern *shirk* is an active and dynamic force. It is a more conscious and assertive form of idol worship. In this vein Quṭb describes the communists, capitalists and secularists of his age as greater unbelievers (*ashaddu kufran*) than the pre-Islamic idolaters and opponents (*mushrikūn*) of the Prophet.¹⁰⁰⁰ Quṭb, it seems, faces a more dangerous form of *shirk* than the Prophet himself.

⁹⁹⁶ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/114. *In the Shade*, 10/291-2.

⁹⁹⁷ Quṭb follows 'Abduh in ruling images and pictures permissible under Islamic law. Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2622. Quṭb. *In the Shade*, 13/98. ("Islam does not suppress poetry and art altogether, as many understand. It disapproves of poetry and art that give full rein to whims and reactions, dreams.")

⁹⁹⁸ We find allusions to the Egyptian regime of al-Nāṣir throughout Quṭb's commentary on verses pertaining to Pharaoh. See A. H. Johns. 'Let my People Go! Sayyid Quṭb and the vocation of Moses', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1-2 (1990); 143-170.

⁹⁹⁹ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 3/1414. *In the Shade*, 6/300.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 1/105-6. *In the Shade*, 1/144.

Contemporary *shirk* is more dangerous in another sense. This again closely parallels modern *jāhiliyya*. The *shirk* of Quṭb's age, unlike pre-Islamic idol worship, actively masquerades as Islam. We recall that Quṭb views none of the Islamic societies of his age fully applying the *sharī'a*. While some Muslim countries openly proclaim secularism, he notes in *Ma'ālim*, others pay lip service to Islam yet none fully govern by God's law. The modern Muslim community, then, is in reality a *mushrik* community. Quṭb writes:

We still need to explain who are meant by the term '*mushrikūn*'. These are those who claim that any being has a share of God's attributes... (including) acknowledging the authority to legislate. Needless to say, the term *mushrikūn* includes those who claim this for themselves, however strongly they profess to be Muslims. We should be clear about who belongs to our faith.¹⁰⁰¹

The term *mushrik* applies to all regimes that grant sovereignty to other than God, regardless of whether they identify as Muslim. Quṭb writes of ostensibly Islamic regimes luring unsuspecting Muslims into submission to other than God, under the veneer of Islam. The impression is that this is a more duplicitous and dangerous form of *shirk*:

These regimes may profess to be Muslim... but at the same time they suspend God's law and replace it with man-made law... Despite all this, people continue to think that they live as true Muslims in a Muslim society. Is it not true, they ask, that the good among them continue to pray and fast? The central question of whether sovereignty belongs to God alone or to a diversity of deities no longer concerns them since they have been tricked into thinking it has nothing to do with religion.¹⁰⁰²

A society of praying and fasting Muslims, then, does not constitute a true Islamic society. Quṭb describes the majority of Muslims as 'tricked' into ignoring the question of sovereignty and his account of the origins of this deception are of note. Quṭb ascribes this to Zionist and colonial attempts to weaken and divide the Muslim world.¹⁰⁰³ The promotion of false and narrow conceptions of Islam that relate only to ritual acts, Quṭb writes, and the creation of Muslim states that profess Islam while suspending God's law, are the latest in a string of Zionist and colonial schemes against the Muslim world.¹⁰⁰⁴ But this also exposes the divide between Quṭb and the lives of the majority of Muslims. A life of prayer, charity and fasting, for Quṭb, becomes a life spent in ignorance of the real meaning of 'no god but God'. It is to be the unwitting subject of Zionist and colonial designs. Quṭb's prison writings presume an esoteric distinction between those like Quṭb who perceive the true reality of things, the real nature of modern *jāhiliyya* and *shirk*, and the mass of ordinary Muslims, who do not.

At this stage one must address the notion of *takfīr* or excommunication in Quṭb. As addressed in a previous chapter, the relation between sins and unbelief was an early debate in the history of Muslim theology. Mainstream tradition responded to the Khārijite's by reaching a consensus that performance

¹⁰⁰¹ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1129. *In the Shade*, 5/201.

¹⁰⁰² Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1033 *In the Shade*, 5/38-9.

¹⁰⁰³ *Ibid.*, 328, 472 and 1087-8. *In the Shade*, 4/38-9 and 4/336. Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 171. *Milestones*, 111. For an argument that is was the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 that took Quṭb's thought in a more Islamic direction; Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 120-135. Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 101-123. Sayyid, Quṭb, *Ma'ā'irakātuna ma' al-Yahūd* (al-Qāhira: Dār al-Shurūq, 4th ed. 1980).

¹⁰⁰⁴ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 2/1033 *In the Shade*, 5/38-9.

of sins did not, in itself, constitute unbelief.¹⁰⁰⁵ But Quṭb's exact stance on *takfīr* is unclear. Much of Quṭb's writings seem almost designed to invite accusations of *takfīr*. We recall Quṭb's claim that the Muslim world was *jāhili*, that the term *mushrik* extended to those claiming to be Muslim, and that the essence of *tawhīd* was the recognition of God's exclusive sovereignty, a criteria notable absent in the modern world. He writes:

Those who say they are Muslims...in reality they are not sincere in their worship of God, and they do not actualize, in reality, the testimony that there is no god but God. They submit their necks to (other) slaves like them, who act like gods over them and legislate for them...They are not believers.¹⁰⁰⁶

The question in essence is between unbelief and belief, *shirk* and *tawhīd*, *jāhiliyya* and Islam. This must be clear. People are not Muslims, even if they proclaim to be, as long as they live a life of *jāhiliyya*...This is not Islam, they are not Muslims. Today our task is to return these ignorant people to Islam and make them Muslims all over again.¹⁰⁰⁷

Quṭb often speaks not of the Muslim world but the "world that claims to be Muslim."¹⁰⁰⁸ Yet he never directly addresses the issue of *takfīr* in *Ma'ālim* or *Fī Zilāl*. He never engages the *fiqh* or jurisprudence of apostasy, meaning the kinds of passages above are never clarified. Only during his final trial, on being questioned by the prosecution, did Quṭb dissociate himself from a mass *takfīr* of Muslims. Quṭb affirms the presence of individual Muslims in a broader culture of *jāhiliyya* and *shirk*:

What I mean the 'Muslim *umma*' is that which governs all of its worldly affairs, individual and general, political, social, economic and ethical, according to the *sharī'a* of God...By this standard, it is not present in Egypt or in any other country. But this does not preclude the presence of individual Muslims. As for the individual, then judgment relates to his doctrine and ethics. As for the *umma*, judgment relates to its entire system of life.¹⁰⁰⁹

Quṭb thus places his entire discourse on a macro-level. The notion of individuals committing acts of *shirk* largely recedes from view. The problem of *jāhiliyya* and *shirk* is the problem of the prevailing cultures, structures and systems of the age, one in which the belief and status of individual Muslims is not denied.

It could be argued that Quṭb, a literary scholar, writes idiomatically in prison, that his discourse of *jāhiliyya* and *shirk* should not be taken literally but is, rather, a poetic call for a more deeply Islamic society. This is how supporters have read his works. In the editorial footnotes to a recent edition of *Ma'ālim*, his Arabic biographer al-Khālidī writes:

We need to remember that *jāhiliyya* does not necessitate *kufr*...Sayyid Quṭb is often accused of declaring *takfīr* over Muslims...even though he did not think in this way. (What Quṭb means by *jāhiliyya*) is that

¹⁰⁰⁵ For an overview of this see Toshiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: a Semantic Analysis of Īmān and Islām* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965), 1-17, 83-140.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl* 1339.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 208. *Milestones*, 137.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 45. *Milestones*, 32.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Sayyid, Quṭb. *Limādha 'adamūnī?* (Al-Sharīka al-Su'ūdiyya li-bahath wa al-Taswīq, n.d.), 38. Also Al-Khālidī. *Min al-Milād*, 433.

we simply have to purify our thoughts, cultures and sciences that all the errors of *jāhiliyya* are linked to, that confuse us, and that narrow our path...¹⁰¹⁰

Others argue that Quṭb uses the category of *jāhiliyya*, not *kufr*, precisely to avoid *takfīr*.¹⁰¹¹ His brother Muḥammad Quṭb (d. 2014) cites the defense at trial, noted above.¹⁰¹² In this way Quṭb's supporters seek to distance him from any association with *takfīr*. But these attempts to absolve Quṭb perhaps only serve to reinforce the link. Nor, it seems, do they factor all the available evidence. It could be argued that Quṭb's defense at his trial conceals his real attitude vis-à-vis the Muslim masses. Attention is drawn here to Quṭb's final, uncompleted work, published only posthumously in 1985, in which he strongly alludes to the unbelief of anyone who actively or passively supports non-Islamic government.¹⁰¹³ Quṭb condemns these as "helpers of false gods" (*anṣār al-ṭawāghīt*), and writes:

We stand before a group today...that claim to believe in what the Prophet revealed. They say, 'We declare there is no god but God, Muhammad is the Prophet of God, we affirm the truth of the messengers, angels, Hereafter.... But God does not accept this from them! Nor does he consider these statements (sufficient for) faith!...Why? Because, as they say this, they submit to the rule of false gods, not the *sharī'a* of God....God thus does accept their speech. Their speech does not enter them into Islam, give them the label 'Muslim', or protect their blood and wealth, as it is joined with a willingness to submit to the *sharī'a* of other than God.'¹⁰¹⁴

This seems directed at the masses of Muslims and not limited to the macro-level, forcing us to rethink Quṭb's position on *takfīr*. It may reflect the final stage of development in his thought. Or, it may reflect a long-held view that Quṭb never disclosed previously and which he conceals during his trial. We cannot be certain. The question of *shirk*, *takfīr* and Quṭb's real attitude to the Muslim masses, then, remains unclear.

In light of this it should not surprise that fears over *takfīr* in Quṭb are not new. These fears emerged in MB circles during the final years of his life.¹⁰¹⁵ Three years after Quṭb's death, then-leader of the MB Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī (d. 1973) wrote the treatise *Du'āt, lā Quḍāt* (Preachers, not Judges).¹⁰¹⁶ Ostensibly addressed to Mawḍūdī though clearly aimed at Quṭb, al-Huḍaybī rejects the notion of *ḥākimiyya* as alien to classical tradition.¹⁰¹⁷ He argues that the message of the Qur'an has been available to guide Muslims since the Prophetic era; given the universal nature of the message, it is false to claim Islam no longer exists in society.¹⁰¹⁸ Lastly, al-Huḍaybī argues with recourse to Muslim scripture and the

¹⁰¹⁰ See editorial footnotes in Quṭb. *Ma'ālīm*, 37, n.1.

¹⁰¹¹ Ahmad 'Abd al-Madṣūd, al-'Āṣa. *Aqīda Sayyid Quṭb: Shubuhāt wa Rudūd* (Dār al-Wafā', 2009), 362-366.

¹⁰¹² See the defence of Muḥammad Quṭb in Kepel, *The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, 64.

¹⁰¹³ Sayyid, Quṭb. *Muqāwwimāt al-taṣawwur al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1418/1997).

¹⁰¹⁴ Quṭb. *Muqāwwimāt*, 178-9. Also Hartung, *A System of Life*, 208-9.

¹⁰¹⁵ Barbara Zollner, 'Prison Talk: The Muslim Brotherhood's Internal Struggle,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:3 (2007); 411-433.

¹⁰¹⁶ Ḥasan, al-Huḍaybī. *Du'āt, lā Quḍāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr al-Islāmiyya, 1977). Barbara Zollner argues al-Huḍaybī wrote the work alongside clerical scholars from al-Azhar and senior Muslim Brothers, all of whom were anxious to confront the radical interpretations of Quṭb's thought. See *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan al-Hudaybi and Ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁰¹⁷ Al-Huḍaybī. *Du'āt*, 63. ("we are certain that this word...is not found anywhere in the Wise Book...and nor did we find any hadith that includes this word.")

¹⁰¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-62.

classical tradition that once a person declares the *shahāda* he is a Muslim, even if he sins. Al-Huḍaybī reflects the ambivalent reception of Quṭb in later MB history.¹⁰¹⁹ He also sets the terms for a common critique of Quṭb in subsequent decades. Later critics follow the basic contours of al-Huḍaybī’s treatise and view Quṭb’s ideas as contrary to the established teachings of Islamic tradition, with a clear potential for radical, exclusionary interpretations.¹⁰²⁰

Another question arising from Quṭb concerns the method for removing *shirk* and implementing the *sharī‘a*. Quṭb emphasizes action over theory, as has been seen. Indeed the whole tenor of his prison works is that Islam cannot rest while non-Islamic regimes are in place. Rival political systems are not neutral – they usurp the divine attribute of sovereignty and subject people to man-made legislation, actively prescribing laws over the law of God. Modern *shirk* also masquerades as Islam to lure unsuspecting and ignorant Muslims. Quṭb is clear: the message of Islam is to remove such *shirk*.

The role of Islam is not only to destroy wooden and stone idols. That was not the purpose of all the efforts and sacrifices made by God’s messengers and their followers in history...it is necessary to look carefully at forms and appearances in every situation to establish whether the existing order conforms to the concept of *tawhīd* or to a form of *shirk*.¹⁰²¹

This takes us to role of jihad, a major theme in Quṭb.¹⁰²² Quṭb extols jihad as the means God has provided to establish the rule of God.¹⁰²³ He speaks of jihad by both preaching (*dawā*) and what he ambivalently terms “the movement” (*al-ḥaraka*). It is clear the latter means use of force. Drawing on notions of a practical religion, Quṭb writes that Islam engages preaching to reform ideas and beliefs and the ‘movement’ to tackle the practical barriers to the implementation of *sharī‘a*.¹⁰²⁴ He insists it is naïve to think one can remove the *jāhili* system by preaching alone.¹⁰²⁵ History, he writes, proves that *jāhiliyya* will fight to preserve its existence.¹⁰²⁶ Reading this into the life of the Prophet, Quṭb notes the Prophet did engage in preaching in his early Meccan years but insists this was a temporary strategy; the real principle of jihad is the use of force, as seen in the Prophet’s final years in Medina.¹⁰²⁷ Moreover, he argues the conflict between Islam and *jāhiliyya* is an eternal state, not a temporary phase, as Islam cannot compromise on the sovereignty of God.¹⁰²⁸ It is at this point that Quṭb’s writings acquire a revolutionary tone:

Establishing the rule of God on earth, abolishing the rule of man, returning sovereignty to God from its usupers...cannot be achieved only through preaching. Those who have usurped the sovereignty of

¹⁰¹⁹ Calvert. ‘Wayward Son’, *passim*.

¹⁰²⁰ Muḥammad, ‘Amāra . *Al-Sahwa al-Islāmiyya wa al-Taḥadī al-Haqārī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1989).

153. (“Quṭb went beyond Mawdūdī in pronouncing society to be *jāhili* and pronouncing *kufr* upon it. He stated what Mawdūdī had not, passing the judgment of *kufr* upon the *umma*, and not upon the society and the state. He expressed this judgment with certainty, and he indeed pronounced the judgment of this *umma*’s being in a state of *kufr* over the centuries.”)

¹⁰²¹ Quṭb *Fī Zilāl*, 4/221-6. *In the Shade*, 10/292.

¹⁰²² For an overview see Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 228-253.

¹⁰²³ Quṭb. *Ma ‘ālim*, 82-116. *Milestones*, 53-77.

¹⁰²⁴ Quṭb. *Ma ‘ālim*, 84. *Milestones*, 55.

¹⁰²⁵ Quṭb *Ma ‘ālim*, 89. *Milestones*, 59.

¹⁰²⁶ Quṭb *Ma ‘ālim* 83-4 and 89. *Milestones*, 46 and 59.

¹⁰²⁷ Quṭb. *Ma ‘ālim*, 84. *Milestones*, 55

¹⁰²⁸ Quṭb *Ma ‘ālim*, 112. *Milestones*, 73.

God...are not going to give up their power merely through preaching. If this had been so, the tasking of establishing God's religion would have been easy!...This cannot be attained unless both preaching and movement are used.¹⁰²⁹

This religion is...a comprehensive revolution (*thawra shāmila*) against the sovereignty of man (*ḥākimiyyat al-bashr*), in all of its forms and manifestations, its systems and places. It is a complete revolt (*tamarudd kāmīl*) against any place on earth where mankind rules...Any system where judgment is reserved to men, or the source of authority is men, deifies men.¹⁰³⁰

The quietism of traditional Sunni political theory, stressing obedience even to corrupt rulers, is nowhere in evidence here.¹⁰³¹ Quṭb describes jihad as a liberation (*tahrīr*) from the rule of men over men but insists this does not mean the forced imposition of belief.¹⁰³² Jihad, he writes, aims only to remove the physical obstacles that prevent the sovereignty of God; once in place, people are free to believe or not.¹⁰³³ Yet one suspects that Quṭb presumes an Islamic system would be so manifestly superior that non-Muslims would surely convert *en masse*. From this Quṭb attacks the argument, common to Muslim discourse in the twentieth century and promoted by figures like 'Abduh, that jihad means only defensive war.¹⁰³⁴ These 'defeatist' Muslims, as Quṭb calls them, perceive neither the true nature of Islam or *jāhiliyya*:

This group of thinkers, a product of the sorry state of the present Muslim generation, have but the label of Islam and have laid down their spiritual and rational arms in defeat. They claim, 'Islam prescribes only defensive war!', and think they have done some good by depriving Islam of its method by which it abolishes all injustice from the Earth, to bring people to submission to God alone.¹⁰³⁵

Conflict with non-Islamic systems is not only permissible, then, but a sacred obligation, an essential part of the faith. It is the means of establishing the rule of God on earth. In this way Quṭb's conception of *tawḥīd* appears inherently combative. The core doctrine of the oneness of God, manifest through the *sharī'a*, cannot be realized except by resisting its opposite.

There is little doubt that Quṭb envisions some kind of confrontation with the secular Egyptian regime. This also likely precludes any role for the masses, who, for Quṭb, were ignorant of the true nature of the faith. But much else of Quṭb's writing on jihad is ambiguous. There is nothing explicit in his works as to the timing, tactics or legitimate targets of jihad, for example, while questions over the scope and method of violence are also unaddressed. Quṭb calls for a revolution against the *jāhiliyya*, but gives little practical detail to achieve this. Shepard writes:

¹⁰²⁹ Quṭb *Ma'ālim* 89. *Milestones*, 59.

¹⁰³⁰ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 87. *Milestones*, 57-8.

¹⁰³¹ For this see E.I.J Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 30-1. Hamid Enyat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 4. For a more nuanced approach see Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁰³² Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 87. *Milestones*, 58.

¹⁰³³ Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 94. *Milestones*, 61.

¹⁰³⁴ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 86-7. *Milestones*, 56.

¹⁰³⁵ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 86-7. *Milestones*, 56.

In fact, very little in Qutb's description of his "revolution" is specific. There is no indication of its precise circumstances; of how the revolutionary vanguard would be recruited, led, or organized; or what tactics it would use. All of this would presumably be dealt with when the time came.¹⁰³⁶

This could reflect Qutb's distaste of theory and speculation, seen earlier, or it may be that such practical matters were not yet resolved within Qutb himself. Writing from prison, perhaps, Qutb could personally attest to the importance of removing the *jāhiliyya* but the practical details of this were not yet worked out. Alternatively, John Calvert suggests that such discussions were taking place among Qutb and his followers in prison but were not written down.¹⁰³⁷ The imperative of jihad is a key theme in Qutb's prison writings, then, but its scope and method is another considerable area of ambiguity.

The *sharī'a kawniyya* (cosmic law).

This chapter now turns to briefly examine a second reflection on *shirk* in Qutb. The doctrine of *jāhiliyya* that defines Qutb's prison works, we recall, is not limited to issues of legislation and governance. This is the central attribute but *jāhiliyya* extends to the cultural, intellectual and philosophical levels. It is as a metaphor for all aspects of secular, Enlightenment modernity. Qutb's discourse of *jāhiliyya* thus extends beyond the call to govern by the legal commands of the *sharī'a* and points to a deeper sense of disenchantment and alienation that Qutb perceives to lie at the heart of secular modernity. This, in turn, leads to another reflection on *shirk*. This second reflection evokes a different kind of 'association' with God, in which people turn to material 'gods' and idols to placate the loss of a sense of the sacred in the secular world.

Qutb conceives of Islamic law as a cosmic law or *sharī'a kawniyya* which connects man's inner nature with the wider workings of the cosmos. As God is creator of both man and the universe, the *sharī'a* harmonises man with the universe around him. Qutb notes in *Ma'ālim*:

The *sharī'a* which God has given to man to organize his life is a cosmic law (*sharī'a kawniyya*). It is related to the general laws of the universe and harmonious (*mutanāsaqa ma'ahu*) with it. Thus, obedience to the *sharī'a* is a necessity for human beings so that their lives become harmonious and in tune with the rest of the universe. Also, obedience to *sharī'a* is the only way harmony is found between the physical laws operative in the biological life of man, and the moral laws which govern his voluntary actions. Only in this way does man's personality, internal and external (*muḍmira wa zāhira*), become integrated.¹⁰³⁸

The *sharī'a* provides a sense of unity, harmony and balance between man and the laws of the universe. All aspects of life, for Qutb, from the inner working of the body to the movements of the planets, are regulated and governed by this law. Further appealing to *dhawq*, the true believer, Qutb writes, 'tastes' the union between the cosmos and individual.¹⁰³⁹ This, he adds, is the nature of the straight path (*al-*

¹⁰³⁶ See also Shepard, 'Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jāhiliyya', 531.

¹⁰³⁷ Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 229-254.

¹⁰³⁸ Qutb, *Ma'ālim*, 137. *Milestones*, 89.

¹⁰³⁹ Qutb *Fī Zilāl*, 3/1204. Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 82.

ṣirāt al-mustaqīm) that is referred to in the first chapter of the Qur'an, which regulates man's primordial nature (*fiṭra*) with the movements of the cosmos.¹⁰⁴⁰

This is the essence of Quṭb's call for *sharī'a*. It is more than just a call to govern by its legal injunctions and Quṭb criticizes the "narrow" interpretations of *sharī'a* that relate only to legal commands (*aḥkām qānūniyya*).¹⁰⁴¹ The crux of the malaise of modern *jāhiliyya*, then, is not only that non-Islamic systems usurp the attribute of divine sovereignty and subject people to man-made law over the law of God. More deeply, the problem is that under non-Islamic systems we invariably lose this sense of cosmic harmony and balance. Quṭb explains:

Man is incapable of making laws for a system of life which can be in complete harmony with the universe or can harmonize his physical needs with external behaviour. The capability belongs solely to the Creator... Conflict begins when man deviates from the truth... under the influence of his own desires, and when he follows laws based on his own opinions instead of God's commandments. Instead of submitting to the True Master with the rest of the universe, he rebels and revolts.¹⁰⁴²

The failure to implement the *sharī'a* means misery and corruption on earth. There is a strong Hobbesian element in Quṭb, a clear if implicit assumption that life is 'nasty, brutish and short' if removed from God's law. Quṭb sees this evident in the modern world. He defines non-Islamic systems as the "slavery of man over man" (*'ubūdiyyat al-bashr lil-bashr*) and his critique of secular systems is marked by scathing depictions of their apparent injustices: a common theme is to condemn the inequalities and exploitations of capitalism and the atheist materialism of communism.¹⁰⁴³ More deeply, however, Quṭb's critique of *jāhili* society looks beyond these manifest injustices and points to a deeper sense of confusion, disenchantment and misery:

Present-day humanity is afflicted with misery, anxiety, bewilderment and confusion; it flees from its true self by taking recourse to opium, hashish and alcohol... All this, despite material prosperity, high productivity and a life of ease with abundant leisure. In fact, this emptiness and confusion increase in proportion to material prosperity and convenience... the first impression gained by anyone visiting the prosperous, wealthy countries of the world... (is that) he will quickly realize that this material prosperity, sensual enjoyment and sexual satiation lead to a sinking into the morass of nervous and psychological disease, sexual perversion, constant anxiety, illness and lunacy, frequent crime, and the lack of any human dignity in life.¹⁰⁴⁴

Quṭb presents an image of secular modernity as essentially one of misery, crisis and decay. Removed from the *sharī'a kawniyya* or cosmic law, modern man is confused, unhappy and ill at ease. We do not live in a state of cosmic balance and harmony. Instead, we live a life of "hideous schizophrenia."¹⁰⁴⁵ Quṭb's project, then, is not only political in the sense of challenging the secular distinction between

¹⁰⁴⁰ Quṭb. *Fī Zilāl*, 1/26. *In the Shade*, 1/8.

¹⁰⁴¹ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 86-7. *Milestones*, 56.

¹⁰⁴² Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 139-40. *Milestones*, 89-91.

¹⁰⁴³ Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 19-21. *Milestones*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Quṭb, *This Religion of Islam*, 24-5. For similar passages see Hartung, *A System of Life*, 199.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Quṭb, *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, 34-61.

religious and political authority. His call to implement the *sharī'a* is also part of a much deeper call for cosmological integration and re-alignment.

This opens another reflection on *shirk* in his writings. Having lost a sense of the sacred, modern man seemingly turns to the false gods of materialism. A core aspect of secular, *jāhili* society for Qutb is that material goods are worshipped in God's place. If not rooted in God's law, we commit *shirk* through the false gods of pleasure and property. Qutb writes:

In America, new gods are worshipped, which are thought to be the aim of human existence - the gods of property, the god of pleasure, the god of fame and the god of productivity. So it is that in America men cannot find themselves, for they cannot find the purpose of their existence. The same is true of other states of ignorance, where similar gods are worshipped, and people cannot find God.¹⁰⁴⁶

Qutb spent some years in America and uses this to buttress his claims.¹⁰⁴⁷ In *Fī Zilāl* Qutb also speaks of the 'lords of fashion houses' (*arbāb al-azyā'*) that demand obedience from modern women. The following passage is significant for Qutb here ties this to the issue of sovereignty and extends the scope of *ḥākimiyya* beyond the realm of legislation and governance:

The servitude (*al-'ubūdiyya*) towards men rather than God does not stop simply at servitude of judges, leaders and legislators...When the god of fashion prescribes a certain style in clothes, cars, buildings, parties people unquestioningly follow them. No-one even contemplates dissidence. If people submitted themselves to God in an even smaller measure than they do to fashion lords, they would be truly devout...If this is not sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) and lordship (*rubūbiyya*), what is?...The poor woman who feels she must wear something too revealing, despite its being unsuitable for her figure, and wear make-up that leaves her subject to ridicule, cannot stand up to the lords of fashion (*arbāb al-azyā'*) with their great power, nor the society devoted to it. If this is not sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) and lordship (*rubūbiyya*), what is?¹⁰⁴⁸

Qutb detects in this another underhand Zionist conspiracy. He notes how most of the fashion houses are "financed by Jews, who make the greatest profits from the fashion industries."¹⁰⁴⁹ Zionist influence, again, lies behind Muslim *shirk*. This sheds light on two reflections on *shirk* in Qutb. The dominant reflection is the issue of sovereignty and the need to implement *sharī'a* law in society. On this basis, all secular systems are manifestations of *shirk*. But this does not preclude another dimension of *shirk*, which points to a deeper sense of alienation inherent in secular modernity and which leads Qutb to speak of the 'lords of fashion houses'. Qutb alludes to the latter in *Fī Zilāl* when he warns readers of the kind of *shirk* that is "stronger, deeper and harder" than that relating to legislation and governance.¹⁰⁵⁰

¹⁰⁴⁶ Qutb. *This Religion of Islam*, 26.

¹⁰⁴⁷ John Calvert. "The World is an Undutiful Boy!" Sayyid Qutb's American Experience". *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11 (2000), 98. Sayyid, Qutb. *Amrīkā allatī ra'āyū* (Qāhira: Dār al-Madā'in al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī'i, 1998).

¹⁰⁴⁸ Qutb. *Fī Zilāl*, 4/1940. *In the Shade*, 9/324.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Qutb. *Fī Zilāl*, 4/1940. *In the Shade*, 9/324.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Qutb. *Fī Zilāl*, 4/1940. *In the Shade*, 9/324.

In conversation with Western thought

It becomes clear from the foregoing that Qutb critiques all aspects of modern secular society. Beyond the key issue of sovereignty, he also detects a deeper misery and angst intrinsic to the secular world. It could be argued on this basis that Qutb's prison writings should be taken in broader perspective, that his notions of *jāhiliyya* and *sharī'a* engage questions of authority, sovereignty and the nature of Enlightenment secularity that concern political theorists more broadly. This final section examines this in more detail. It reveals that Qutb is a much richer and more complex figure than a one-dimensional, straightforward critic of the West. First, there is significant common ground between Qutb and a range of Western theorists who share much of his critique of secular modernity. Secondly, a closer reading of Qutb's prison writings reveals the deep imprint of the very twentieth century ideologies that he condemns. This points to a latent tension in his works that belies his claims to Islamic purity, to be free of *jāhili* influences. As will be shown, this tension appears to crystallize on Qutb's writings on *shirk*.

As noted earlier, Roxanne Euben reads Qutb as essentially a critic of modern, Enlightenment-inspired rationalism and the parallel rejection of religious authority from the political sphere. But it is important to note that much of Qutb's critique echoes a 'counter-Enlightenment' tradition that finds its origins in the Enlightenment project itself, and which continues in various guises into the modern period. Indeed, Euben's main conclusion is to point to the clear parallels between Qutb and a range of Western political theorists who critique the Enlightenment project on similar grounds. Euben writes:

Several Western political theorists share with Qutb a vision of modernity as a condition of crisis and decay, despite radical differences with Qutb and with each other about the ways in which the "modern malaise" may be remedied...Qutb shares with a diverse array of Western theorists – and of Westerners in general - the anxiety that modern rationalism has exacted too heavy a toll.¹⁰⁵¹

Qutb's concerns about the schizophrenia of modernity and the costs of rationalism resonate with those in the West who are similarly concerned with the ways in which the rupture with tradition and transcendent foundations has resulted in crises of authority, morality and community.¹⁰⁵²

In particular, Euben points to moral philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929) and Charles Taylor (b. 1931) as two Western theorists concerned with a perceived rupture with tradition in the West, and the crises of authority that flow from a lack of transcendent foundations.¹⁰⁵³ Qutb has great differences of course with these and other thinkers in conceiving the malaise in terms of *jāhiliyya* and presenting a vague if evocative call to the *sharī'a* as the solution. But it is worth noting that his essential critique of secular modernity, its perceived sense of alienation and lack of spiritual, moral and transcendent foundations, is shared with these Western interlocutors.¹⁰⁵⁴ This deepens our reading of Qutb. His critique of Enlightenment modernity, captured in the doctrine of *jāhiliyya*, is not an example of

¹⁰⁵¹ Euben. 'Comparative Political Theory', 33.

¹⁰⁵² Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid..

¹⁰⁵⁴ John Calvert. 'On the Mythic Foundations of Radical Islam', *Orbis* 48 (2004), 31. ("seen in this way, radical Islam sheds some of its exoticism and acquires a degree of historical normalcy.")

“orientalism in reverse”, as has been claimed.¹⁰⁵⁵ Nor is James Toth correct to describe Quṭb’s writings as “an awkward outpouring of defensive discourse.”¹⁰⁵⁶ Rather, Quṭb presents a considered critique of the sense of spiritual vacuity, materialism and secular legislation that lies at the heart of Enlightenment modernity, the latter rooted in an elevation of human reason at the expense of transcendent authority. In so doing, Quṭb reveals his common ground with a range of Western political theorists who critique Enlightenment notions of rationalism and secular modernity on similar grounds.¹⁰⁵⁷

Quṭb’s relation to Western thought can be addressed from another angle. This relates to the tension in Quṭb’s works between his claims to ideological purity, on the one hand, and the implicit indebtedness to many of the core concepts and categories of the modern, *jāhili* world, on the other. It is clear in *Ma‘ālim* that Quṭb views himself entirely free of *jāhili* influence. He speaks in the past tense of a time when *jāhili* influences clouded his thought:

The person writing these lines has spent forty years of his life in reading books and researching almost all aspects of knowledge...then he turned to the fountainhead of his faith (the Qur’an). He came to feel that whatever he had read so far was nothing in comparison to what he found there. But he does not regret spending his life in pursuit of these sciences, because he came to know the nature of *jāhiliyya*, its deviations, errors, ignorance, its pomp and noise, arrogance and boastful claims. Finally, he became convinced that a Muslim cannot combine these two sources – the source of divine guidance and the source of *jāhiliyya*.¹⁰⁵⁸

A recurring theme is to revive the “purity” and “pure way of thinking” of early Muslims, the ‘unique Qur’anic generation’.¹⁰⁵⁹ Yet a deeper look at Quṭb challenges his pretensions to purity and reveals the clear influence of *jāhili* sources. In many ways Quṭb’s conception of Islam is remarkably modern. Frequent descriptions of Islam as a system (*niẓām*), for example, reflect modern usage.¹⁰⁶⁰ The concept of *ḥākimiyya*, central to Quṭb, is a neologism not found in the Qur’an or the classical tradition. Quṭb seems aware and tries to reconcile this; hence the claim in *Ma‘ālim* that the first Muslims knew instinctively that the term divinity (*ulūhiyya*), meant sovereignty (*ḥākimiyya*) and revolution (*thawra*).¹⁰⁶¹ Quṭb’s conception of sovereignty is also distinctly modern - we recall the difference between Quṭb and classical commentators on the verse 12:40 – and tied to notions of authority and legislation that make sense perhaps only in the context of a modern nation state. The sociologist Anthony Giddens observes that modern states are sovereign because, unlike their pre-modern counterparts, they are able:

¹⁰⁵⁵ See Ellen McLarney. ‘American Freedom and Islamic Fascism: Ideology in the Hall of Mirrors.’ *Theory & Event* 14:3 (2011), 2. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 153. Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, *On Orientalism and Orientalism-in-Reverse Among Muslims: Some Aspects of Edward Said’s Contributions and Its Misappropriation* (Singapore: The Reading Group, unpublished paper, 1999), 11; Calvert. ‘The World is an Undutiful Boy!’, 93.

¹⁰⁵⁶ James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The life and legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 282.

¹⁰⁵⁷ This is explored in further detail in Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 154-233.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 145-6. *Milestones*, 94.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 32. *Milestones*, 17. Carré, *Mysticism and Politics*, 27.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 33. Covered in detail in Shepard, ‘Islam as a ‘system’, 31-50.

¹⁰⁶¹ Quṭb. *Ma‘ālim*, 42-3. *Milestones*, 24.

To make laws and effectively sanction their upkeep; exert a monopoly over the disposal of the means to violence; control basic policies relating to the internal political or administrative form of government; and dispose of a national economy that is the basis of its revenue.¹⁰⁶²

The parallels with the all-encompassing nature of *jāhiliyya* are clear.¹⁰⁶³ Quṭb takes a modern conception of political and legislative sovereignty, then, and applies this to the law of God. In sum, Quṭb's attempt to revive a past ideal of Muslim purity, free of *jāhiliyya*, jars with a vision of Islam that is deeply shaped by the modern world in which *jāhiliyya* is such a defining part.¹⁰⁶⁴

This tension is most explicit in Quṭb's writing on *shirk*. To recall, Quṭb views any challenge to divine sovereignty as a manifestation of *shirk*. The secular systems of communism, capitalism and nationalism are condemned by Quṭb as the 'idols' of the age. Yet a closer reading of Quṭb reveals the deep imprint of these systems upon his thought. In *Ma'ālim* Quṭb describes Islam as

a universal declaration of the liberation of man from servitude to other men... it is a comprehensive revolution (*thawra shāmila*) against the idea of the sovereignty of man... Any system where final decisions are referred to human beings, in which the sources of authority are human, deifies human beings and makes them lords over others in place of God.¹⁰⁶⁵

Descriptions of Islam as a 'comprehensive revolution' reveal the influence of twentieth century Western trends of liberation theology and Marxism, not classical tradition.¹⁰⁶⁶ Quṭb's vision of a dedicated vanguard (*ṭali'a*) of Muslims, moreover, tasked with overthrowing the *jāhili* system and to whom he dedicates *Ma'ālim*, echoes Marxist theory.¹⁰⁶⁷ There is perhaps a Marxist-inspired dialectic in his stress on a timeless battle between Islam and *jāhiliyya*. The claim that ordinary Muslims falsely believe they live in the Muslim world, rather than in *jāhiliyya*, echoes a Marxist false consciousness. Even the language Quṭb often uses to depict the *jāhiliyya*, such as the "servitude of man over man" (*ubūdiyyat al-bashr lil-bashr*), appears modeled on class conflict. Scholars of Quṭb note these parallels.¹⁰⁶⁸ Quṭb dismisses a secular system like Marxism as a manifestation of modern *shirk*, then, an idol of the age, but much of the language, methods and categories of Marxist thought seem integral to Quṭb's own conception of Islam.

¹⁰⁶² Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 282. C.f John Calvert. 'The Mythic Foundations', 37.

¹⁰⁶³ Shepard, 'Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jāhiliyya', 535. ("Qutb's totalistic and systemic view of Islam and jāhiliyya undoubtedly reflects the increasing control of the state over society and the totalizing claims of many modern ideologies.")

¹⁰⁶⁴ Euben. 'Comparative Political Theory', 50. ("While his explicit task is a resurrection of a past ideal, his very project – its language, symbols and focus – is defined as much by his contemporary interlocutors as by the origins of Islam.")

¹⁰⁶⁵ Quṭb, *Ma'ālim*, 87-88. *Milestones*, 57-8.

¹⁰⁶⁶ For the link with African or Latin American liberation theology, see Yvonne Y. Haddad. 'Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival', in John L. Eposito, ed. *Voices of Islamic Resurgence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983): 67-99. For links with Marxist thought in Qutb, see Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 16. William Shepard, 'Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jāhiliyya', 535.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Quṭb. *Ma'ālim*, 27. *Milestones*, 12.

¹⁰⁶⁸ William Shepard, 'Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jāhiliyya', 535: ("we must also give some "credit" to the Marxists for the form, if not the content, of his doctrine.") Hartung, *A System of Life*, 205. Euben. 'Comparative Political Theory', 42. ("Qutb's dialectical view of history also evokes a decidedly different, Marxist tradition.") Hendrik Hansen and Peter Kainz. 'Radical Islamism and Totalitarian Ideology: A Comparison of Sayyid Qutb's Islamism with Marxism and National Socialism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8 (2007); 55-76.

It would seem Quṭb is aware of the tension. He anticipates claims that his vision of Islam is not too distinct from the very systems he models this against. In a brief passage in *Ma‘ālim*, he insists that any similarities between the Islamic and *jāhili* system are entirely coincidental:

Sometimes it appears that some parts of Islam resemble some parts of the life of people of *jāhiliyya*, but these aspects are not *jāhili* nor are they from *jāhiliyya*. This apparent resemblance in some minor aspects is a mere coincidence. The roots of the two trees are entirely different.¹⁰⁶⁹

Quṭb cannot of course acknowledge his deep indebtedness to these *jāhili* systems. This would undercut both his claims to be free from any traces of *jāhili* influence and his emphasis, seen earlier, on the comprehensiveness (*shamāliyya*) of Islam, the idea that Islam is a distinct and dissimilar alternative to all rival systems. More often Quṭb criticizes other Muslim thinkers who strive, in his view, to find similarities between Islam and the West. Quṭb describes these as ‘defeated’ Muslims:

There is nothing in our Islam of which we are ashamed about... This is the defeated mentality; defeated before the West, the East and all forms of *jāhiliyya*. This is found in some people – Muslims – who search for resemblances to Islam in man-made systems, or who find justifications for the actions of Islam and its decisions on certain matters by means of the actions of *jāhili* civilization. A person who feels the need of defense, justification and apology is not capable of presenting Islam to people. Indeed, he is a person who lives a life of *jāhiliyya*.¹⁰⁷⁰

This critique is aimed at Muslims who would see the West as a possible source of guidance and imitation for Muslims. Yet Quṭb is clearly guilty of what he condemns in others. He falls short of his own standards, albeit with the caveat that his indebtedness to Western thought is implicit, couched behind a discourse of modern *jāhiliyya* and *shirk*. Perhaps this should not surprise us. Quṭb is himself a product of twentieth-century Enlightenment modernity, a context in which Western thought and influence was pervasive. It is hardly credible that his conception of Islam will be inculcated entirely from the milieu in which he lived. This is precisely what he claims, of course, but a closer reading reveals Quṭb is influenced and repulsed by Marxism in equal measure.

Conclusion

In closing, two final aspects of Quṭb’s prison writings merit closer scrutiny. Firstly, it is clear that in many ways Quṭb is not a unique or original figure in recent Egyptian or Islamic history. It has been argued that Quṭb is known more for his impact than originality; “Quṭb stepped into a stage largely constructed by the intellectual and political work of others.”¹⁰⁷¹ We see this in several ways. In an Egyptian context, Quṭb is tied to the trajectory of the MB movement as its leading ideologue after the assassination of Ḥassan al-Bannā, in 1949. Quṭb also draws on broader revivalist streams that gained currency across the mid-twentieth century, particularly the works of Mawḍūdī.¹⁰⁷² The notions of *jāhiliyya* and *ḥākimiyya*, key pivots of Quṭb’s thought, were taken from Arabic translations of Mawḍūdī,

¹⁰⁶⁹ Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 199. *Milestones*, 131.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Quṭb, *Ma‘ālim*, 209. *Milestones*, 138.

¹⁰⁷¹ Euben. ‘Comparative Political Theory’, 34.

¹⁰⁷² For a detailed account see Hartung, *A System of Life*, 193-213.

with the latter a popular theme in Indian Muslim discourse at the time.¹⁰⁷³ More broadly, Qutb engages questions of authority, sovereignty and secularism that speak to political theorists more broadly, and makes a critique of secular modernity that resonates with several Western theorists. One finds the clear imprint of revolutionary trends of Western thought, particularly Marxist ideology, for Qutb's conception of Islam. In total, then, Qutb can be seen to draw on a broad range of trends from Islamic and Western discourses. Qutb's importance and contribution to modern Islamic thought lies less in originality, perhaps, than in an ability to synthesize these multiple, diverse strands of influence.

The second aspect of Qutb's writings is its strong sense of ambiguity, the refusal to be bound by the questions that have historically preoccupied Islamic thinkers. Qutb refuses to define the meaning of *sharī'a* and is ambivalent on both the issue of *takfīr* and the scope of jihad. He never fully explores or unpacks his most consequential ideas. There may be several reasons for this. Subject to torture and isolation, Qutb's prison works do not aim to be dry and scholastic, perhaps, but aim to express, in fluid and powerful prose, the core truth of *jāhiliyya* as Qutb had come to perceive it, and to offer an urgent call to action. A literary scholar who ruminated on the Qur'an in prison, it is no surprise his works seem ambiguous when approached through the lens of the classical tradition. Alternatively, it could be argued that Qutb had not resolved many of these matters in his own mind - he had not, perhaps, found the answers to the questions his ideas raised by the time of his execution. We could also point to the mystical nature of Qutb's prison works. Qutb, we recall, engages the idea of *dhawq* or taste in prison. In this vein Qutb writes in *Ma'ālim* that his idea of a future Muslim society is clear, but only 'in his heart';

If, because of the sorry state you are in, you cannot see the true picture of the Islamic life, because your enemies, the enemies of this religion, are all united against the establishment of this way of life, against it taking a practical form, then let us show it to you. Thank God, this picture is in our hearts (*ḍamā'irna*), seen through the window of the Qur'an, (a picture of) our *sharī'a*, our history, our vision of the future, whose coming we do not doubt!¹⁰⁷⁴

The echoes with the 'eye of the heart' (*ayn al-qalb*), a common term in Sufi discourse, are clear. The vision of a true Islamic society, for Qutb, is thus not to be detailed in books or articles, in what he calls 'the *fiqh* of papers', to the uninitiated. It has to be 'tasted' to be known. Rooted in a sense of *dhawq*, Qutb may feel no need to specify the precise details of his thought. It is the preserve of the chosen few who, like him, have 'tasted' the truth.

Qutb's lasting influence in the Arab and Muslim world tells us the sense of ambiguity of his works has not affected his appeal. The attraction of Qutb likely rests in the power and flow of his rhetoric, his criticism of Western influence in the Muslim world, his evocative call to live by the *sharī'a* and, above all, his status as a martyr. Accounts of Qutb's execution have acquired an aura of sanctity for later

¹⁰⁷³ Qutb, reportedly declared "no difference" (*lā farq*) between his thought and Mawḍūdī, Al-Khālīdī. *Sayyid Qutb; min al-Milād*, 435.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Qutb, *Ma'ālim*, 199. *Milestones*, 133-4.

followers, blurring the lines between hagiography and history.¹⁰⁷⁵ Among this is a famous poem, written by his sister, Amina Quṭb, shortly after Quṭb's execution:

Did you envision us meeting? Or has it already,
Taken place in the land of the mirage,
Then it withdrew and its shadow vanished,
And turned into tortuous memories,
Thus asks my heart whenever,
The days grow long, after your absence....
Did we not walk upon the truth together?
So that Good can return to barren land,
So we walked along a thorny path,
Abandoning all ambitions,
We buried our desires deep within ourselves,
And we strove on in contentment, expecting a reward from God.¹⁰⁷⁶

It is worth noting in conclusion that Quṭb's conception of *shirk* played a direct role in his final trial and execution.¹⁰⁷⁷ According to official court transcripts, the state prosecutor questioned Quṭb on his understanding of Islam and nationalism (*waṭaniyya*). The dialogue is recorded:

(Question): What is your view of the current regime?

(Quṭb's answer): I consider it a *jāhili* regime!

(Question): So this means you see the need to change this regime?

(Answer): It will be changed once there emerges the basis for an Islamic regime.

(Question): And what is the meaning of idol (*tāghūt*) in your view?

(Answer): It means any *sharī'a* other than the *sharī'a* of God!

(Question): And what is your view of nationalism? Do you acknowledge or reject it?

(Answer): In my view nationalism has to be based on doctrine (*'aqīda*), not land. And we need to change the understanding of this term, as it is restricted to a region, to this much broader understanding....

(Question): And what is the meaning and significant of *ḥākimiyya* in your view?

(Answer): It means the *sharī'a* of God and the basis of all legislation.¹⁰⁷⁸

Quṭb then condemns both patriotism (*qawmiyya*) and nationalism (*waṭaniyya*) as non-Islamic notions rooted in Zionist and colonialist attempts to weaken and divide the Muslim world. He stresses that *sharī'a* alone should be the basis for Egypt.¹⁰⁷⁹ There is nothing in this testimony that is not readily

¹⁰⁷⁵ For an overview of some of the hagiography Calvert, *Sayyid Quṭb*, 265-271.

¹⁰⁷⁶ C.f. John Calvert, *Islamism: A Documentary and Reference Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 141.

¹⁰⁷⁷ For a full account of his trial, see al-Khālidi. *Sayyid Quṭb; min al-Milād*, 441-483.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Al-Khālidi. *Sayyid Quṭb; min al-Milād.*, 434.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 432.

evident across his prison works. The crux of the issue for Qutb is that a Muslim cannot distinguish the core doctrinal belief in the oneness of God, or *tawhīd*, from exclusive submission to His law. This conviction, with its promise of hostility and revolution towards all non-Islamic systems, led to Qutb's eventual execution by the Egyptian government in 1966. Unique among figures surveyed in this thesis, then, Qutb's conception of the nature and meaning of modern *shirk*, its attribution to all secular regimes, including the Egyptian regime of his time, was to play a direct role in his death.

Conclusion

That one should rethink the nature of *shirk* beyond ‘simple’ definitions of gross outward idolatry...seems to me an important and necessary task for both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars.¹⁰⁸⁰

In a semi-autobiographical work that explores the role and meaning of the *sharī‘a* in the modern world, Khaled Abou el Fadl opens by stressing the inevitability of change and historical contingency. This, he writes, invariably impacts how each generation engages the normative tenets and meanings of the faith. El Fadl writes:

Since the Qur’an...was revealed, for centuries Muslims have memorised and recited the same words and verses about compassion, mercy, and love. The words have not changed. But what did mercy, compassion, or love mean fourteen hundred years ago, and what do they mean today? Even if the basic dogma and rituals of Islam remain unaltered for centuries, whether consciously or unconsciously, Muslims are forced to constantly restate, re-articulate, and rephrase their religious tradition...in essence, consecutive generations of Muslims have had to struggle with what Islam means to them and, as importantly, with what Islam means to the world in which they live...Generations of Muslims wrestled with these questions, and the generations of the twenty-first century and beyond will be no different.¹⁰⁸¹

What, then, does it mean to commit *shirk*, to ‘associate’ something with God? Echoing El Fadl, we can state that for centuries Muslims have read and recited the same Qur’anic verses that warn against *shirk*. But what did *shirk* mean at the advent of Islam, what did it mean throughout later Islamic history and how is it to be understood today? As central a concept as *shirk* is to Islam, this thesis reveals how there is no one understanding or definition of this concept. The prohibition of *shirk* is central to the Qur’an and lies at the heart of the Islamic understanding of monotheism. In this vein, *shirk* has a special power and potency in Islamic thought. Yet this thesis reveals that *shirk* is a multifaceted concept, open to a wide range of dynamic interpretations.

The Qur’an has multiple ways of speaking of *shirk* and offers a range of reflections on the nature of ‘association’ with God. This continues across later Islamic thought. In the life of the Prophet, *shirk* is equated with the literal worship of idols. Yet later figures came to interpret *shirk* in ways that reflected the social and intellectual contexts and concerns of their age. For Ibn Taymiyya, *shirk* is conceived as the love of other than God and manifest in the cult of Muslim saints, a response to the dominant Ash‘arī school and the defining feature of Mamlūk-era piety. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, *shirk* is a vast catch-all category that covers almost all facets of popular Muslim belief and practice. Stressing actions as the key criterion of faith, outward acts of *shirk* are the means by which Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb distinguishes true from false Muslims. A vast reading of *shirk* becomes an equally broad *takfīr* of the Muslim community. Muḥammad ‘Abduh insists that Islam is a rational and progressive religion at home in an

¹⁰⁸⁰ Yassin Dutton. ‘Reviewed work: The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History by G.R. Hawting’, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 12:2 (2001), 179.

¹⁰⁸¹ Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari‘ah in the Modern Age* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), xix-xx.

age of colonial modernity. ‘Abduh presents a range of reflections on *shirk*, yet the central idea that *shirk* is irrational and a source of socio-political decline is a common underpinning throughout. Sayyid Quṭb insists on sovereignty as a divine attribute, wherein the oneness of God entails exclusive submission to Islamic law. All political systems and ideologies of his Cold War age, from nationalism to fascism to communism, become reflections of *shirk*. Each of these figures were, and remain, controversial. They faced critics in their own time and beyond. Each of these figures devote their lives to the faith and lived in periods of national and political crisis. The power and potency of the idea of *shirk* lent added value to their works and sharpened their critique of Muslim societies. Yet what is key for our purposes is how each of the figures present what they view as the true nature and image of *shirk* in their time. The different reflections on *shirk* outlined in this thesis are many. What they do not offer is a single and fixed image of *shirk*. This thesis ultimately challenges any attempt at an essentialised definition of what it means to ‘associate’ with God.

This is by no means an exhaustive study. On the contrary, it focuses primarily on readings of *shirk* as conceived by a small sampling of thinkers. Readers will note a lack of figures from the formative period of Muslim theology, the ninth to twelfth centuries, also the absence of representatives from the Shī‘ī and Sufi traditions. These are potential areas of research and raise the prospect of further studies exploring interpretations of *shirk* across the many schools, sects and trends of Islamic thought. Even within the constraints of this thesis, moreover, it has not been possible to cover all material. The task of devoting one chapter to each of these figures means that we have not included all aspects of their life and thought, reception histories and intellectual legacy, nor exhaustively examined the mutual influences and crossovers between them. This is either alluded to in each chapter, signposted in footnotes, or awaits further scholarly investigation. Yet it could be argued that the selective focus of this study is a strength that serves to reinforce its central theme. Even here, in the examination of only four thinkers, we find a wealth of different readings of *shirk* and sufficient material for further discussion, reflection and study. And even points of overlap between thinkers, upon closer inspection, reveal their different projects. The best example of this is the cult of saints. The idea that popular veneration of saints and shrines constitutes *shirk* is a repeated theme. Muḥammad ‘Abduh, to recall, writes:

Shirk is of various types...including that which has come to affect the Muslim masses (*‘āmat al-muslimīn*) in their worship of other than God by way of bowing and prostration. And the greatest of these kinds of *shirk* is that by way of supplicating and seeking intercession (with God) by placing intermediaries between themselves and Him...And we certainly see this *shirk* among Muslims today.¹⁰⁸²

These words could easily have come from Ibn Taymiyya or Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb. Yet in what sense can the cult of saints be said to constitute *shirk*, what is the nature of ‘association’ implicit in saint veneration? For ‘Abduh the cult of saints is *shirk* in the sense that it is an irrational form of piety against

¹⁰⁸² Muḥammad ‘Abduh. *Al-A‘māl al-Kāmila li al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Amāra, 2nd edition, 5 volumes (Madīnat al-Naṣr: Dār al-Shurūq, 2006/1427), 2/230.

the scientific and technological spirit of his age. In this, it is also a source of socio-political decline. For Ibn Taymiyya the cult of saints reflects a love for that which is other than God. For Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb, saint veneration reflects a failure to outwardly express the faith in one’s actions, making its adherents and defenders unbelievers. Each figure condemns the cult of saints, but does so in a different way. Shared reflection on *shirk* masks different ways of conceiving its essential nature and meaning.

The primary aim of this thesis is to present the history of an idea: an enquiry into what it means to ‘associate’ with God. But this thesis is also an investigation into the life and thought of four distinct thinkers, each of whom spoke of *shirk*. Exploring Muslim interpretations of *shirk* offers a window into the dynamism and transformation of the Islamic intellectual tradition itself. The words of Daniel Brown are pertinent here:

Tradition is not an enemy of change, but the very stuff that is subject to change. Tradition both changes and may be used to justify change; it can, in fact, be revolutionary. The history of Islamic thought provides numerous examples of how the intellectual tradition of Islam has provided the underpinnings for adaption, reform and revolution.¹⁰⁸³

We have seen this across this thesis. Whether *shirk* relates to Ash‘arī readings of the divine attribute of love, for example, or to Enlightenment notions of rationalism, law and political authority, tells us as much about the different historical contexts and intellectual projects of Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb, as the meaning of *shirk* itself. ‘Abduh’s vision of *shirk* as irrational and a cause of social and political decline is clearly shaped by the era and challenges of colonial-modernity in which he lived. In short, *shirk* offers a lens through which we explore wider changes and transformations across the history of Islamic thought. From one perspective, then, this is a study into the meaning of *shirk*. From another, it treats *shirk* as a cipher for exploring broader issues and debates in Islamic intellectual history.

Despite being integral to Islamic thought, a sustained enquiry into the meanings of *shirk* remains a major lacuna in scholarship. This is perhaps rooted in a tendency in the field of Islamic Studies to focus on the study of specific thinkers, regions or time-periods. Studies rooted in conceptual history, tracing the history and evolution of a certain term or concept, remain uncommon.¹⁰⁸⁴ Another reason is perhaps the tendency to readily equate and reduce *shirk* to the literal worship of idols or physical beings. As has been noted, *shirk* is often translated as ‘idolatry’ in English-language scholarship.¹⁰⁸⁵ This is of course the original or even archetypal image. The Qur’anic account of *shirk* is traditionally viewed as targeted at idol-worshipping opponents of the Prophet. Belief in God and the Prophet is said to have meant an

¹⁰⁸³ Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

¹⁰⁸⁴ For a few examples of this approach, see Toshiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology; a Semantic Analysis of Iman and Islam* (Tokyo; The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965). Joseph N Bell, *Love Theory in Later Hanbalite Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979). Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro and Sabine Schmidtke, eds. *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015).

¹⁰⁸⁵ Muhammad Ibrahim H. Surty, *The Qur’anic Concept of al-Shirk (Polytheism)* (London, 1982), 23. (“Shirk in shari‘ah means polytheism or idolatry. Since a man associates other creation with the Creator has been regarded as polytheist (Mushrik).”) For an example of English-language scholarship that translates *shirk* as ‘idolatry’ and *mushrik* as ‘idolater’, see Jane McAuliffe, *Qur’an Christians: an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

end to idolatry and the destruction of idols. Kenneth Cragg argues that this traditional image of pre-Islamic Mecca as a centre of idolatry has ever since ‘monopolised’ the idea of *shirk*:

The commonest forms, in the first days of such *shirk* were those arising, of course, from idolatry. For to substitute an idol for God is manifestly to do Him wrong. . . . Idolatry has almost entirely monopolised ever since the Muslim idea of what *shirk* is, partly because it is relatively easy to castigate polytheists when one is in no danger of being one, or to shatter with an eager iconoclasm the ‘gods’ that are amenable to destruction by hammers.¹⁰⁸⁶

But this study shows that *shirk* is not limited to idols in a literal sense. Running throughout this thesis is the idea that, after the time of the Prophet, Muslim thinkers moved beyond this original image to conceive different kinds of *shirk* in the societies of their time. Saints, shrines and even political ideologies become the ‘idols’ of the age for later thinkers. Like the idols of pre-Islamic Arabia, however, *shirk* continued to be understood not just in abstract doctrinal terms but with a clear social dimension. For all the figures explored in this study, *shirk* is more than a doctrinal or metaphysical error. It has tangible manifestations in the social and political sphere. From the destruction of idols in the life of the Prophet to Qutb’s vague if evocative calls for revolution, the battle against *shirk* has involved more than reforming beliefs. It has included no less the active reshaping of the social and political space.

Idols do of course give a clear and defined image of what *shirk* is. They stand as a stark antithesis to monotheist belief and practice. But this only further reinforces the need to look beyond idols when attempting to understand the meanings of *shirk*. Perhaps the most salient facet of *shirk* arising from this thesis is the idea that *shirk* is both internalised within the Muslim community and is even hard to avoid, including for Muslims. The ease with which humankind is seen to fall from the worship of one God is a recurring theme. In the Qur’an *shirk* is viewed as a supreme error but one that is deeply-rooted in human history. It is condemned by all the prophets. Early Muslim tradition reveals the struggle to fully renounce idols, pointing to the continuing appeal of idols even among newly-converted Muslim tribes. Ibn Taymiyya acknowledges the challenge, even for sincere believers, to treat God as the sole object of love and to avoid turning others into idolatrous ‘rivals’ of God. Ibn ‘Abdul Wahhāb and ‘Abduh share a conviction that much of Islamic history and contemporary Muslim practice constitutes *shirk* and has departed far from the normative tenets of the faith. For Qutb, the only way to avoid *shirk* is to submit to an Islamic state that did not exist and which he refuses to define. Put simply, it seems easier to commit *shirk*, than avoid it. Much of the problem of *shirk* appears to lie in the ease with which we are led to ‘associate’ with God. While the threat of Muslims worshipping pre-Islamic idols no longer pertains, then, the threat of *shirk* remains and this has in fact been conceived as a defining feature of various Muslim societies by a range of thinkers across Islamic history.

A gradual image thus emerges of *shirk* as a problematic category in Islamic thought. While *shirk* is the ultimate doctrinal sin, it became a complex trope to evoke the certain aspects of human history. The

¹⁰⁸⁶ Kenneth Cragg, trans. *City of Wrong: a Friday in Jerusalem* (London: G.Bles, 1959), xviii.

condemnation of *shirk* lies at the heart of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Avoiding *shirk*, however, appears a challenge that even the sincere believer may struggle to overcome.

In recent times the spectre of *shirk* has been linked to the phenomenon that is typically called 'Islamic iconoclasm'. As seen in the Introduction, recent years have witnessed the destruction of ancient heritage sites and places linked to Sufi and Shī'ī tradition in various parts of the Islamic world. Most famous has been the destruction of sites such as Palmyra in Syria by the group known as Islamic State (IS), also the removal of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001.¹⁰⁸⁷ These actions have been framed and justified as representing the groups commitment to removing *shirk* from Muslim lands. To recall, in February 2015 an unnamed IS fighter stood before ancient relics outside the city of Mosul and declared:

O Muslims! Indeed, these relics behind me are but idols (*aṣnām*) from the people of previous centuries that were worshipped in place of Almighty God. What we call the Ashurians, Assyrians, Arkadians and others, used to take these (false) gods for rain, provision and war. They committed *shirk* with these gods (*yushrikūn*) with Almighty God...And God Most High says; 'We never sent any messenger before you without revealing to Him: there is no god but Me, so serve Me' (Q 21:25).¹⁰⁸⁸

We can of course question the motivations behind these acts. Omur Harmanshah argues it was precisely the high value placed on these heritage sites by international observers that led to their destruction by IS.¹⁰⁸⁹ Yet the theology used to justify the acts was clear. This was said to reflect the clear aims of IS to follow the example of the Prophet. It expressed in vivid terms an atavistic return to the age of the Prophet, one in which *shirk* was manifest once again in literal, pre-Islamic idols of wood and stone. Jamal J. Elias has explored in detail the context surrounding the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2001 and highlighted similar themes. Analysing the statements released by the Taliban, Elias notes the common claim that the statues depicted pre-Islamic idols and had to be destroyed in the manner of the Prophet. Mullah Omar, then leader of the Taliban, is reported to have said that the statues

have been used as idols and deities by the non-believers. Only Allah deserves to be worshipped, not anyone or anything else...We do not understand why everyone is so worried...All we are breaking are stones.¹⁰⁹⁰

Elias notes other arguments made by the Taliban and supporters in the Pakistani press. A common theme was a perceived Western hypocrisy. International outrage at the proposed destruction of statues was contrasted with a sense of indifference towards mass humanitarian suffering in Afghanistan, then

¹⁰⁸⁷ See Finbarr Barry Flood. 'Between Cult and Culture; Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm and the Museum', *The Art Bulletin* 84:4 (2002); 641-659. Ondrej Beranek and Pavel Tupek, *The Temptation of Graves in Salafī Islam; iconoclasm, destruction and idolatry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). James Noyce, *The Politics of Iconoclasm; Religion, Violence and the Culture of Image-Breaking in Christianity and Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

¹⁰⁸⁸ T. Neinawa. *Tadmīr Da 'īsh al-jahal al-irhāb li-mutāḥaf al-Mūṣul al-ḥuḍārī bi-hājat 'ibādat al-aṣnām?!?!'* (26 Feb 2015). Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcGfyeBY-7c> (Accessed 12 March 2016).

¹⁰⁸⁹ Omur Harmanshah. 'ISIS, Heritage, and the spectacles of destruction in the global media', *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78:3 (2015); 170-77.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Jamal J. Elias. '(un)Making Idolatry; from Mecca to Bamiyan', *Future Anterior; Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory and Criticism* 4:2 (2007), 19.

suffering from drought, poverty and a crippling sanctions regime. A crucial moment was a large financial offer to save the statues by the New York Museum of Metropolitan Art. As Elias writes;

The religious argument (against idols) was linked to the accusation of hypocrisy on the part of the international community. The very fact that money was offered to save the statues transformed them from artefacts into idols since they were now being venerated more than human lives, and this reverence necessitated their destruction.¹⁰⁹¹

Western actions, it seems, turned the statues into ‘idols’ in the eyes of the Taliban. Reinforcing the link to the prophet Abraham, Elias notes the time of year in the Islamic calendar. The announcement of the destruction of the statues came only one week before the festival of *‘īd al-aḏhā:*

Mullah Omar’s choice of occasion can hardly be considered coincidental, since the other major act for which Abraham is remembered is his decision to break from the idolatry of his fathers and ancestors, an obvious precedent on which the Taliban modelled their decision to right the wrongs of their forefathers in Afghanistan and destroy idols that they openly acknowledged were part of Afghanistan’s pre-Islamic heritage.¹⁰⁹²

Critics both within and outside the Islamic world condemned the actions of IS and the Taliban, insisting that Islam did not sanction the destruction of historical treasures. Yet the key point for the present study is to question how the preceding analysis of *shirk* impacts our understanding of these acts.¹⁰⁹³ In a sense, this was of course unprecedented. Ancient relics hitherto preserved for centuries were suddenly, in the modern age, classified as *shirk* and destroyed. But from another angle, in terms of engaging the doctrinal question of what constitutes *shirk*, there seems little new here. Both the Taliban or IS root themselves in the Qur’an, particularly the stories of idol-destruction by the prophet Abraham. They use this as a foil from which to conceive the forms of *shirk* manifest in the world around them. If their vision of *shirk* is controversial and contested, moreover, this is again a recurring feature throughout the history of Muslim discourse on *shirk*. Most crucially, the meaning of *shirk* has been repeatedly subject to change, adaptation and reinterpretation. We have seen how the concept of *shirk* can be construed in many different ways. And if we reject the idea of any single essentialised image or definition of *shirk*, the concept is free to be developed in new, controversial and unexpected ways. If we observe how the idea of *shirk* has been put to myriad uses, from the worship of pre-Islamic idols, the popular veneration of saints like Tāj and Shamsān, the failure to acquire modern science and even submission to Western ideologies, the question arises as to why the elasticity of *shirk* could not apply to the preservation and honour afforded pre-Islamic relics. The point is to stress that it is perhaps easier to denounce such ‘Islamic iconoclasm’ on the basis of ethics, sincerity of motive and respect for cultural heritage, than on the basis of engaging debates over what constitutes *shirk*. The latter provides a rich array of responses and opens a contested area of enquiry.

¹⁰⁹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁹² Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁹³ On this, see Finbar Barry Flood. ‘Idol Breaking as Image Making in the Islamic State’, *Religion and Society* 7:1 (2016), 116-125. Harmanshah. ‘ISIS, Heritage, and the spectacles of destruction’, 170-77.

Both IS and the Taliban frame their acts as demonstrating the commitment to a core tenet of the faith; belief in one God and the worship of God alone. This is, again, a central underpinning of this thesis. *Shirk* derives its great power and potency in Islamic thought for what it reveals of its opposite. Belief in the oneness of God undergirds all Islamic thought. Later expressed in the term *tawhīd*, this captures the idea of monotheism in Islam. To return to the quote with which we opened this thesis, the foundational importance of *tawhīd* is neatly expressed in the following words by the Shī'ī scholar, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī;

Islamic intellectual history can be understood as a gradual unfolding of the manner in which successive generations of men have understood the meaning and implications of professing God's unity. Theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, Sufism, even to some degree the natural sciences, all seek to explain at some level the principle of *tawhid*, "To profess that god is One."¹⁰⁹⁴

The common thread throughout this thesis, from the Qur'an through to Quṭb, is that a valuable way of expressing what the oneness of God means for Muslims is by condemning its opposite. Different readings on *shirk* reveal, in turn, different conceptions of *tawhīd*. Whether the doctrine of the oneness of God entails the exclusive love of God alone, the rational acquisition of modern science and technology or the exclusive submission to the *sharī'a*, for example, reveals fundamentally different conceptions of *tawhīd* among the figures surveyed in this thesis. These are also, of course, integral to their respective visions of *shirk*. This thesis ultimately demonstrates the mutual impact and influence of *shirk* and *tawhīd* upon the other. As conceptual opposites, *shirk* and *tawhīd* appear as complementary doctrines, giving meaning and shape to the other. Yet if Muslim interpretations of *shirk* are subject to change, this raises the question of what *shirk* could mean in the future. Sayyid Quṭb's vision of *shirk*, mapped onto the Western political systems and ideologies of his age, was not possible in the Mamlūk era of Ibn Taymiyya. Though only half a century separates the death of Ibn 'Abdul Wahhāb from the birth of 'Abduh, the reality of colonial modernity is entirely absent in the former and deeply shapes the latter. The historian of religion Wilfried Cantwell Smith argues the focus of intellectual historians should not only be the past, on what ideas and terms meant in previous times, but on what this means for their growth and development in the present and even into the future:

By all means let us, with regard to anything, know how it became; but let us study further how and what it went on becoming. The study of history must be in large part the study of creativity.¹⁰⁹⁵

¹⁰⁹⁴ Allāmah Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī. *A Shi'ite Anthology*, trans. William Chittick (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 23.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Cited in Peter J. Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption: Iblīs in Sufi Psychology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 17.

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